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by

PATRICK LEYTON

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BY FOUL MEANS

CHAPTER I

A TRAGEDY RECALLED

"Do tell me, Frank, who is that remarkably beautiful woman over there to your left? It's a party of three, four tables away."

The two friends were dining at a smart restaurant in Piccadilly, and Henry Addison's companion, Frank Daneham, a fair, good-looking man of about forty, with the keen, far-seeing eyes of the artist (in which profession he had achieved great success), slowly turned his head and glanced towards the table in question.

"Yes," he said, "I'm not surprised at your question. That's Hermione Rodenberg, a dear friend of mine."

"What? Not the widow of old Rodenberg, the South African multi-millionaire who died last year?"

"That's just who she is. The man on her left with the rather saturnine cast of countenance, is Colonel Bessington—now retired—I joined his regiment during the little fracas—The other woman is Iza Marsh, Hermione's companion."

"By Jove!" Henry Addison pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. "Then she's rich as well as being the most beautiful creature I've ever clapped eyes on in my life."

"Yes, my boy. The richest woman in England, and incidentally the most unhappy."

"Not really? Well, of course, one can see that in her face," said Addison, with another glance at the exquisite profile, the dazzling pureness of complexion enhanced by dark chestnut curls, and above all the pathetic downward curve of the sensitive mouth. "But why so? Tell me."

"If you really want to know, I'm the man to spin the yarn," replied the other. "For I happen to be the only person living, except Hermione, who knows the true facts of a very remarkable story."

"Then by all means let's hear it," said Addison. "A fellow who has just got back from the African jungle has a keen ear for home stories. Besides, a woman with a face like that is bound to have something in her life worth hearing about."

"I'll tell you if you'll give me your solemn word of honour never to repeat it to a living soul. For it affects me too, and though it happened a long time ago, still one never knows. For you see, did the truth ever come to light, I might be liable to a long term of penal servitude for being accessory after the fact to a nasty little crime called murder."

"Lord! Man! You don't mean it?"

"Fact, I assure you. If I tell you, you will be the only man who knows. One other who guesses, is that fellow over there, Dick Bessington. But so long as it only remains at that all is well."

"Of course, you have my word, Frank, old man. That goes without saying."

"Right. Well, as a matter of fact, I'm rather glad

to be able to talk about it. I've kept it locked up for nine years now, and there can be no harm in telling you, anyhow. But I'll wait until we get back to my rooms, where I can tell it without being overheard."

As they rose from the table half an hour later, Hermione Rodenberg looked round, saw them, and gave the artist a radiant smile. Then, making their way out through the maze of small tables, some still occupied, others already empty, the two friends returned to Daneham's rooms in Jermyn Street and were presently ensconced in easy chairs before a crackling wood fire, when the artist at once began his story.

"First of all, do you ever remember hearing about a young fellow called Dominic Arden?"

"Arden," repeated his friend. "Yes, of course I do. Old Scotch family, or rather, English migrated to Scotland many generations back. Old out-of-the-world place on the far north-east coast called Ardenmore."

"That's the man. Well, what I am going to tell you about happened in '17, when Dominic Arden was twenty and I a comparative youngster of thirty, who had laid down the brush for the temporary sword, as you know. The Ardens were as poor as rats; young Dominic—a remarkably good-looking lad, by the way—joined up as a ranker in my regiment. For we were great pals and I was awfully fond of him in spite of his queer red-hot temper. Well, before he came out, he and Hermione Craig were married."

"What? Mrs. Rodenberg?"

"The same. A complete love match, idyllic, poor kids!" Daneham paused, and his friend, regarding

him intently, realized that he was about to listen to tragedy.

"Well, to go on. Dominic Arden was a bit of a dreamer, too. Had the gift of writing, and might have made a name for himself had he lived, but—well—it happened this way:

"Our headquarters—over in Flanders—were in an old farm-house. The C.O., Colonel Grimshawe, was a bit of a bully and not particularly nice in other ways. Hated the fellow myself and I wasn't alone in this, but Bessington and he were great pals. We had just had a hectic time and those who were left had retired to this comparatively peaceful spot for a spell of rest. I was alone with Grimshawe in his particular sanctum when the tragedy occurred. Dominic Arden had just come in with a message for me, and at the moment old Grimshawe happened to be talking about different women he had been mixed up with, and girls whom he would like to have been mixed up with, and among them he mentioned Hermione Craig. He had no idea, of course, that Dominic was her husband, and that was his only excuse—where there was none—for what he said. I remember his words distinctly, and he spoke just as Dominic came into the room.

" 'My dear fellow, Hermione Craig is just like all the rest of them. You pay your money, you know, at least I do—' and he ended with a nauseating laugh full of meaning. I won't attempt to describe my feelings here, for, you see, I had seen Dominic come in and I had seen his face. The next thing I realized was that he was standing over the colonel, his face the colour of chalk and his eyes full of hell.

" 'You'll take that back, you swine!' he said, between gritted teeth. 'It's a damned lie and you know it. You'll take it back now, this moment, or, by God! I'll kill you.'

"My dear fellow, I can hardly even now bear to think of what happened then. And it was all so quick. There was no time even for me to interfere. Grimshawe had risen, his red face purple with rage. He could hardly speak. I heard him stammer something about a damned scoundrel, and the next thing I knew was a sickening thud as Dominic, who had immense strength of arm, felled him with a blow, and he went down with his head striking a portion of the iron fender while Dominic stood over him and I, galvanized into action at last, sprang to my feet.

"Well, of course you have guessed what happened. The colonel was dead when I got to him. The blow itself, though it split his skull—for he fell on a point and was a tremendously heavy man—might not have been instantly fatal, but I think it was actual shock that killed him. Anyhow, he was dead, and there was I, a witness to something that, if not actual murder (which in point of fact it was, if you take the intention into consideration), could only be paid for by death. And there was Dominic, the lad whom I loved almost as a brother and there also, was my duty."

"My God! How ghastly!" ejaculated Henry Addison. "And what actually, did you do, old man?"

"What I actually did no one save Dominic, Hermione, myself, and now you, will ever know. Dominic was still standing over his victim when I looked up from where I knelt beside the body.

" 'He's dead,' I said.

" 'I'm glad to hear it,' said Dominic. 'I meant to kill the swine.' His voice was loud, and a couple of Tommies alone in the next room heard the words through the thin wooden partition which served as a wall, and are still alive to give evidence, were it ever necessary. I got up then, and faced him.

" 'You know what this means, old man?' I said, and he replied quite quietly:

" 'Yes, I know. But after all, one more murder out here, judicial or otherwise, is of little account.' And then he put his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the face. 'Tell her, old man, tell her—' But a sob choked him and it was then that I knew I couldn't send him to his death—not that kind of death—and I flung him away and pointed to the door.

" 'Go, now at once,' I whispered. 'I will explain, only for God's sake go.'

" 'What! And leave you here to face it? Oh no.' He laughed at the idea.

"But I explained to him that I meant to tell the real facts of what had happened, with the addition only of an imaginary ending.

" 'Take my revolver," I said, thrusting it into his hand, 'I shall say that you threatened to shoot me and so got away. I shall give you three minutes to clear out and take your chance, and then I shall give the alarm. If you don't agree to this I shall shoot you first and then myself, and that's all there is about it. That settled it, of course.

" 'After all,' he said, 'you are only giving me another choice of death, but it's an honourable one, and

for that I thank you. Good-bye, old man. God bless you You will know what to tell her, for even if I escape with my life, I'm dead to her for ever.'

"When I looked up again he was gone. I waited three minutes and then summoned help, and it was Bessington who came in first. I told him what had happened, with the added lie at the end. But I have never been quite sure that Bessington believed my story. For the fact of there being no trace of Dominic Arden when they hurried out in search of him, told rather against me. And Bessington, like his friend, Grimshawe, is not altogether a pleasant man.

"Well, the end of the story is only what one could expect. Dominic must have made his way to the fighting zone again, for his body was among the killed, three days later; that is, if one can really identify a man by his disc and number and so on, without the addition of any physical help. For the head of the dead soldier was smashed to a pulp, though undoubtedly the height, build, and general appearance was that of Dominic Arden.

"All the same, Harry, I have a queer feeling that he is not dead, and that one day—Ah well! of course it's ridiculous. He could never show up again in any case."

"What a horrible tragedy," said Addison. "And what happened to her—the wife?"

"As you see, she is still living—by some miracle—for she and Dominic were twin souls. At the time I could not think why a merciful Providence allowed her to live After she had searched in vain for traces of him she finally believed in his death, and then, two

years ago, to my complete amazement, she married old Rodenberg; is now once more a widow, and Bessington is head over ears in love with her, and God knows what will happen in that quarter. What interests me most at the moment is that she has just bought Ardenmore, the loneliest, most God-forsaken place you can imagine, and where she swears she is going to live."

"Did the Ardens sell it then, or what?"

"As a matter of fact there are no more Ardens left. The old folk sold the place soon after their son's death, and then died, broken-hearted. Then the new owner got tired of it, never lived there, I believe—and very gladly sold it to Mrs. Rodenberg. She, poor soul, was extremely badly off—went out as a companion—until she married Rodenberg who, of course, left her everything he possessed. I often wondered—" And then Daneham broke off and stared across into vacancy.

"What? Tell me, I am tremendously interested."

"Well, I wondered if actually she married him in order to buy the place back. For you see, Dominic worshipped every corner of it. And now she's going to live there, presumably—this is what she gives out to the world generally—in order to escape from the money-grabbers, begging letters, and all the things which make life a complete hell to the rich, I believe."

"Ah, well, personally I could put up with a taste of that kind of hell," observed Addison, dryly.

"You think so, but I doubt your sticking it for long. However, there it is. Ardenmore is a gloomy house, hundreds of years old, standing in a dense forest, with a queer old tower on the coast, once a smuggling base, and, if rumour is right, repeating itself histori-

cally now. There is also a secret connected with that tower which Dominic discovered but never lived to tell. The place is twenty miles from the nearest station, no telephone, no anything. Hermione goes there directly with her companion and any heavily-bribed servants who are willing to go. Of course, she knows her own business best, but—well—I wonder!"

"It makes one wonder a bit," agreed his friend. "Does she still believe that Dominic Arden died—out there?"

"That I am unable to tell you, for she never speaks of it now, though in other respects she treats me as a true friend. What she really thinks about that, is locked away in her heart, known only to herself—and God."

"But she has bought back Ardenmore. Why?"

Frank Daneham shook his head and shrugged eloquently.

"And supposing," persisted the other, "that young Arden *did* turn up, what would happen?"

"My dear fellow," the artist gave a short laugh, "if seen and caught he would be hanged for murder. Why, as I told you, that fellow Bessington doubts my story, and what's more, doesn't believe that Arden was really killed. He is probably, and for all I know to the contrary, always on the watch for his return. That's the very devil of the whole thing, don't you see, for remember he's in love with Arden's wife."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Addison. "What a situation!"

CHAPTER II

ARDENMORE

"ARE you absolutely determined to go and live in that ghastly place, Hermione?" demanded Colonel Bessington, rather grimly, as he stood leaning against the mantelpiece in the drawing-room of Mrs. Rodenberg's beautiful house in Mayfair. He stared down at her as she sat leaning forward, her frail-looking hands clasped round one knee, her eyes looking into vacancy.

"I am absolutely determined to live alone in Ardenmore," she replied quietly. "I am tired of all this, tired of everything connected with my life in London. I want to go somewhere where I can be alone—quite alone, and where I shall be able—just to think."

"Well, from all accounts you appear to have selected the one place in the modern world where thought will be your only entertainment," observed the other dryly. "And in my opinion you are making a big mistake. It's wrong, all wrong. No woman, and certainly no woman as beautiful as you, has any right to go and bury herself away like that."

"We all have a right to choose our own lives," she replied quietly. "Beauty does not come into it at all."

"Yes, it does, when there happens to be someone who worships your beauty; who adores you body and

soul; who would sacrifice life, honour, and all he holds most dear for your sake. Then I maintain that you have no right to do what you contemplate doing, and I protest against it, and implore you to reconsider it."

Hermione raised her eyes to his working face.

"Please, please, Dick!" she cried, in a voice of entreaty. "You know what I said about all that. You know that it's no use, no use at all. I shall never marry again, on that I am determined."

"I know you said all that, but I refuse to acknowledge it as final. You, of all women, need the protection of a man who loves you, and I do more than that, for I worship you. I refuse to allow you to go out of my life."

She shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

"Do you mean that you'll even follow me there—to Ardenmore, if I ask you not to?"

"I mean—just that." The stern lips widened in a smile in which there was no mirth.

"Is that kind? Is it honourable? Is it the act of a man who really loves? I thought that true love was self-sacrificing."

"True love is what I feel for you, Hermione, and in plain English, I simply can't live without you."

She rose suddenly to her feet and faced him.

"Don't make me hate you, Dick," she said. "I should loath to do that, of all things. But I know you, and in a way I understand and am terribly sorry for you. If only you had not given up your profession, there would have been something to hold you to oc-

cupy you, to live for besides this fantastic dream of yours. But as it is—well—let us compromise. Let me have at least a month alone just to put myself right with myself and with life and everything else. Then, if you still wish it, you may come and see me. But remember, I give you no hope at all. I shall never change now—never, never."

There was finality in her tone, could he but have heard it, but he heard nothing save the idle words of a woman who thought she knew what she wanted and one day would learn from him how mistaken she had been. But at the moment he was wise enough to comply with her request.

"Very well," he said. "I agree to abide by that. You shall have your month, and then . . ." He took both her hands and pressed burning kisses upon them, held them tight for a moment, looking into her eyes, and then without another word abruptly turned and left her.

She stood where she was until the front door closed with a loud bang, and then she turned as quick steps came into the room.

"Well, has he gone?" asked a crisp voice, and her friend and companion, kindly-faced, plump Iza Marsh sailed—for so only could her progress be described—towards her.

"Yes, gone. Quite gone."

"Thank God for that. I can't bear the man, never could. I suppose he proposed again?"

"Yes."

"Like his impudence. Well, my dear, you'll be a clever woman if you can keep him out of Arden—

thingummy-bob. If there's no road to the place he'll fly there."

"He has given me one month——"

"Without the option. Kind of him. Well, all I can say is—damn his impudence. However, enough of him. I believe I've found you a cook. I mean, of course, a cook who won't object to being buried alive. She's Irish, and that, I suppose, accounts for it, as they're mostly semi-insane. But she can cook, which is the great point. Have you successfully bribed the great Phillimore yet, or is it a hopless job?"

"Phillimore doesn't need bribing, Marshy dear. He likes the country and he has a cousin, an old soldier, who is out of a job and keen to take the place as odd man. He can also drive a car. If one could only get a housemaid, life would be perfect."

"*A* housemaid, child! In that house! Might as well talk of *the* chambermaid at the Ritz. You'll want three at least. If you were willing to give sixty quid a year I believe you'd get six."

"I'll give anything so long as I can get them."

"Very well, then, I'll take it on. And now, what the devil is one going to do about hair?"

"Hair?" repeated Hermione. "What hair? Whose hair?"

"Yours and mine, child. Since we had it cut off in order to save trouble, I personally, have spent more time and money on my head than I did in all the years before it was shingled. There are no hairdressers in Ardenmore Glen, you know, so the only solution to the problem that I can think of is to lie on the floor

at night and let the mice gnaw it. The place is sure to be swarming with them."

"You silly old thing," said Hermione, laughing "Locharbie is only twenty miles away, and is quite a big town. And in any case what does it matter? I shall love to be untidy for once."

"You, yes. It'll suit you, my dear. But what about me? My style of illusive beauty requires a French maid and a Parisian coiffeur to make anything like a decent show."

"To me you are perfect, darling, whatever you look like." And suddenly Hermione's arms were round the elder woman's neck. "Oh, Marshy! I'm just longing to be there, alone with you and with my dear ghosts."

"Poor child!" Iza Marsh held her very close for a moment. "But we must have no ghosts, my dear. No ghosts and no memories. Enough that you have got the old place back and that your boy will know it is being cared for. That, after all, is what matters, and what you, in fact, went through two years of hell for."

"Yes. I suppose it was wrong of me to marry him only for that. But at least I tried to make him happy."

"And no one knows that better than he did, my dear. You have nothing to reproach yourself with." There was silence for a moment.

"I wonder," said Hermione at last, "If Dominic really will know."

"Bound to, child. His body, after all, was the only part of him that died. But there! Enough! Let's leave all that alone. Housemaids, my dear, housemaids. Far more important than souls."

And so it came about that ten days later there was an exodus from one of London's great termini, comprising two ladies, one butler accompanied by male relative, two buxom and middle-aged housemaids, both well bribed and corrupted by Iza Marsh, and one Hibernian cook who had a hazy notion that they were all on the run and making for shelter among the Wicklow hills. And on the late afternoon of the following day, just twenty-eight hours later, they all disembarked from a local train on to a siding which boasted a hording on which the name Ardenmore was emblazoned in somewhat worn-out letters; a wizened and ancient man who left off minding cows in order to become a porter whenever a train had the hardihood to stop there; and a loose truck which had been uncoupled fom the rear of the train and on which reposed a large touring car.

Iza Marsh, clad in tweeds of a manly, and, to her style of figure, most unbecoming, cut, stood upon the platform and stared round at the scene of isolation that presented itself, and which the fast disappearing train—last link with civilization—seemed to accentuate.

"God help us all!" she ejaculated. "The only extenuating circumstance in the whole insane situation is the fact that your overworked secretary, John Bray, appears to have achieved a miracle when he was up here a fortnight ago. For how on earth he managed to discover even an ancient crone who knew her job as a char beats me. Why, I can't see a butt or even a ben."

"The village is at the other side of that hill," said

Hermione, laughing. "And it appears that Old Betty MacIvor worked for—for the Ardens years ago. At least, we can be assured of a clean house and well-aired beds. The coal was taken up a month ago, and, after all, this is May, and we have quite five months of fairly warm weather before us. Isn't it lovely, Marshy?"

"Lovely, no, my child. Grand, yes. Weird if you like. Romantic. It's all that, and I can imagine its growing upon one. But I'm not going to waste good lies about it, my dear."

They were waiting for the car to be removed from the truck, which function was being achieved by the combined efforts of Phillimore, James, his cousin, and the ancient porter.

"It does grow on one," said Hermione. "I was only here once, just before—he went, and then only for a few days. I really know nothing of the place, but even the little I saw I grew to love. Well, they are ready, so let us be going. The car will return afterwards for the luggage. Mr. Bray said it was a fairly good road."

Soon the seven travellers had packed themselves into the large car and were off.

Hermione was very silent during the twenty odd miles which had to be covered before their destination was reached. Only once before had she traversed the winding road, and that had been in an old-fashioned, four-wheeled dog-cart, propelled by two sturdy moorland ponies, and driven by the one man who had been, and who still was, all the world to her. She remembered that they, too, had been silent, but it was the silence of twin souls who needed no medium of con-

versation. The vast moors, the dense pine forests, the rocky hills down whose precipitous sides the tiny streams descended in minute cascades, the utter stillness save for the call of birds or the sough of gentle wind through the pine trees, had filled them both with a sense of contentment and peace. Here, at this very spot where one of the vast pine forests began, and upon a plateau of green, luscious grass, they had come to rest, had tethered the horses, and had ensconced themselves in the shadow of a grey rock, lichen-covered, and eaten their picnic meal. A wave of torturing agony welled up in her heart at the bare recollection, and in desperation she put a hand on her friend's arm and clutched it.

"Speak to me, Marshy," she said. "Say something." there were tears in the deep voice and not far from the dark hazel eyes, and her friend, knowing all, understood and was quick to respond.

"Well, my dear, I was just thinking about that nonsense John Bray talked about smuggling going on up here. Where on earth could anyone smuggle anything up here? And look at the long sea voyage they'd have to make if they came from France."

"Just the reason for choosing it, as on one would think of them coming all that way," replied Hermione, grateful to her friend for starting such an easy topic of conversation. "The sea, you know, is only half a mile away from Ardenmore, and in the old days I believe lots of odd things happened connected with Ardenmore Tower, that funny old ruin I told you about that stands facing the sea, and—and—

which holds a secret that only Dominic knew of and which one day he said he would tell me."

"Ah, yes, to be sure. Mr. Bray said nothing about that, of course, only that the Powers that be were beginning to sit up and take notice. Of course we know there's smuggling going on—bound to be since they did away with the coastguards—and the Government's simply asking for it by taxing things as they are. But to connect it with this place! Bosh and nonsense, my dear!" She ended with a snort.

The long drive came to an end at last. A broken-down gate proclaimed the entrance to the narrow grass-grown avenue that led for a quarter of a mile through a dense pine forest, and even Iza Marsh's high spirits sank at the sight of the gloomy drive.

"My dear," she said with a slight shudder, "this is even worse than *I* bargained for."

But Hermione had no ears for conversation now, and her eyes were strained to catch a first glimpse of the house which she had not seen for nine long years. John Bray's report that it was habitable had satisfied her, though had it been in ruins she would still have bought it. It was furnished as the Ardens had left it, and for two years had stood empty, so she had no illusions as to what to expect. As for the gardens, Mr. Bray had shrugged eloquently and suggested cutting half the trees down.

They came in sight of the house at last, and Iza Marsh's spirits sank even lower. Little sun could penetrate to that gloomy pile whose stone-flagged roof was green and grey with moss and lichen, whose two round turrets at one end gave a forbidding aspect to

a place that was already sufficiently forbidding. Ivy grew wild upon the walls eating its way into the very windows but Hermione only saw the place which Dominic Arden had loved.

The car drew up before the large doorway to permit her and her friend to alight, and then went round to the back to deposit the servants, and with a little sigh Hermione stretched out her arm and rang the bell.

"At last!" she said, "at last. Now I can breathe once more."

"My dear girl, I'm afraid you'll have to hack down a good many of those trees before *I* can," observed the elder woman dryly.

"Not one tree, Marshy. Nothing. It shall stay as it is."

The door opened as she spoke, and a tall gaunt woman stood in the opening, her keen eyes seeming to take in every detail of the new-comers.

"You are Betty MacIvor, are you not?" asked Hermione, with a smile.

"Aye, to be sure, and you'll be Mistress Rodenberg," was the reply, but with no answering smile, no words of welcome. She stood aside while the two went in, and closed the door.

The wide passage was much as Hermione had remembered it, save that there was an air of forlornness about it, an atmosphere of decay, an odour of damp mustiness which seemed to strike a sudden chill to her heart, and which even the blazing wood fire crackling in the large open fireplace at the end of the passage had apparently no power to dispel. The old woman, who had followed close behind, pointed to it.

"There are fires in the bedrooms as well," she said, and without more words, disappeared through the door leading to the back premises.

"Well, no one can accuse that lady of the gift of the gab," remarked Iza Marsh, dryly, and then, seeing the curious expression—almost as of one who sees visions—on Hermione's face, "What is it, child?" she asked quickly

"It's very strange," she replied slowly, "but in spite of the gloom, the musty smell, and the other odd things that one meets with in houses that have been a long time empty, this doesn't seem quite like an unoccupied house, at least not to me. Does it to you, Iza?"

"Well, I can't say that's exactly my impression," replied practical Iza Marsh. "Personally, it strikes me as being the most dismal, gloomy, unoccupied place that I was ever in in my life, but of course that's *my* idea. Tell me what you mean, my dear."

"I mean that I had an odd feeling when I came in that someone was waiting there to meet us, and it was a sort of mental shock to see this passage and hall empty." She was silent for a moment and then added quietly: "He—was simply devoted to the place, you know. So devoted that perhaps—well, I hardly know how to express it."

"You mean that he may have left something of himself in the house," suggested her friend, sympathetically.

"Yes, perhaps that is it, for it's extraordinary how contented and happy I feel, as though there was no more reason for me to go on yearning and longing and

grieving as I have done for nine long years. I can't explain it, and I don't think I want to. But there, enough of me. Come upstairs and let's see our rooms. Betty MacIvor is certainly not communicative and didn't seem over-pleased to see us, but she knows how to keep a house clean, and that's all that matters."

Alone at last, Hermione, after leaving her friend, sped quickly downstairs and along a rather dark and narrow passage until she came at the end to a closed door, hesitated for a moment, and at length turned the handle and entered a circular room lighted by two narrow windows, and once more on the threshold she paused.

This turret room, dark and gloomy though it was, was sacred ground to her, for it had been Dominic Arden's particular sanctum. Nine years ago she had entered it with him, had been shown his particular treasures. His bookshelf on which stood the books he was fond of, his desk where he wrote his fanciful stories, the pictures on the walls which his mother had painted. She looked round with a spasm of fear in her heart at what she might find to be missing. And there was so much that was missing. The bookcase was there, but empty; the desk was there, empty also; the paintings were no longer on the walls, they were all gone save one, a water-colour printing of the old tower, a solitary stone structure, built, so tradition said, by a Scottish chieftain as a look-out over the seas, standing half a mile from the house and never used by anyone, save Dominic, who had turned the lower room into a study where he could write undisturbed. Why had this picture been left and the rest

taken? And when had they been taken, and by whom? If they were in the house they should be returned to their original places. His room, at least, should be as he had left it. She would have claimed his belongings for her own, but when she recovered from her long illness, Ardenmore had been sold and his parents both dead. They had not known of their son's secret marriage. They had never approved of Hermione Craig. Yes, she would return his things to their rightful places, but where were they?

She turned sharply at a sound behind her, and there in the doorway stood old Betty with an odd look of doubt and suspicion in her eyes. Perhaps, thought Hermione, she would know where they were.

"Where are the other pictures, Betty, and the books that used to be here?"

The old woman shook her head. "I canna' say, Mistress Rodenberg, I have no' set eyes on them for long eneuch."

"But who moved them? Who took them?"

"I dinna' ken, Mistress Rodenberg," was the reply.

"Are they still in the house?" asked Hermione.

"Nay, nay, not in the hoose at a'," and then Betty pointed a skinny finger to the only picture that hung there: "'Tis no place for a body to see the noo. Not a man nor a lassie dare gang by there."

"Why?" asked Hermione, in some astonishment. But the old woman only shook her head and Hermione saw quite clearly the fear in her eyes.

"I dinna' ken what like it is that scares puir folk awa'," she muttered. "But there's that there that

has no' the richt to be there, and there are times when I feel that even here—" She stopped suddenly and gave a quick glance once more round the room. "Come awa', Mistress Rodenberg, come awa'—" she moved backwards through the door, and Hermione, a sudden chill at her heart, turned and followed.

There *was* something there, an odd sensation as though the room had just been occupied. And yet common sense told her that no one could have dwelt in that bare, unfurnished, and most dismal room. It must, therefore, be the echoes of her own heart that had longed to find someone there, and only when the door was shut behind her could she shake off that uncanny feeling and begin to think clearly. Why had those pictures and books been taken when nothing else—so far as John Bray had discovered from the inventory—had been touched since the Ardens had left it? And they had been there when he was here a fortnight ago because she had asked him what the turret room contained, and he had said—"Nothing of any importance: just a desk, a bookshelf with some old books in it, a couple of chairs and some water-colours on the walls." Someone, therefore, had taken them.

Then again there was another odd thing. What was it that scared every man and woman from the old tower by the sea, and which was even too fearsome to be spoken of? What was going on? What had happened in the two years during which the house had stood empty and uncared-for? And what, finally, was going to be the outcome of her action in buying back the old place? There was something here that she could not understand and which filled her for the

first time in her life with a nameless fear. She instinctively felt, too that the old woman—who had gone as silently as she had come—had no friendly feeling towards her and she resented it, for she liked to be liked, she who had not an enemy in the world. And she had come here, not only to care for the place that Dominic had loved and to look upon it as though it were almost a part of him, obtained by her only through much suffering—a loveless marriage which she could only look back upon as at some hideous nightmare—but also she had come there for peace as well, and somehow she felt that there would be neither that peace nor yet that Heven-sent quiet and freedom from worry which she had so much desired and hoped to find there. Instead she felt that there was some disquieting element which having come, she would have to face. What was it?

A quick step along the passage scattered her thoughts far and wide, and she turned to see Phillimore beside her, anxiety portrayed on his usually stolid countenance, inquiry in his voice.

"Police Inspector Mackay from Locharbie is here ma'am, and wishes to see you on a very urgent matter. He is waiting in the hall."

CHAPTER III

THE SCRAP OF PAPER

HERMIONE regarded the butler for a moment in amazed wonder.

"He wants to see me? Why?" she demanded.

"He didn't say ma'am. He came on a motor-bicycle and said he understood that you had just arrived, that he was sorry to trouble you, but he must see you as the matter was urgent."

Still puzzled, Hermione made her way down the dark passage towards the entrance hall, and as she went it suddenly occurred to her that this urgent matter might be in connection with that ridiculous story of smuggling that Mr. Bray had mentioned, and her friend Iza had commented upon during the drive there. But even were it so, what on earth had it got to do with her?

She found the inspector—a well-built, intelligent-looking man—pacing to and fro in the wide passage, his peaked cap under his arm, his blue puttees bespattered with mud and a general appearance of disorder about him which suggested much climbing among sand and rocks, while his highly-coloured, rugged face wore an expression of puzzlement.

"Will this be Mistress Rodenberg?" he inquired, as Hermione came to a stand before him, and his eyes appraised the perfection of her beauty.

"Yes. I understand that you wished to see me. I have only just arrived after a rather tiring journey." She added this faint protest in justice to herself, and the other was quick to see it.

"I must apologize, ma'am," he said, and he spoke with a strong Northern accent, rolling his r's with much vigour, "and I'll not keep you a moment longer than necessary. But duty is duty, and I was sent here to investigate into a matter which has come to our notice, and to inquire if there is anything that you could be telling me aboot it."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Hermione, devoutly wishing the man would come to the point and leave her in peace. "I know nothing about the place, really, as I have only just come here."

"That is so, ma'am, but having bought the place, you'll nae doot be knowing something aboot the property that you have purchased. That tower on the cliff, for instance, it is part of the purchase, too, I suppose?"

"Certainly. It belongs to Ardenmore. In fact, it was originally Ardenmore Castle, and now all that is left is the old tower, which is partly a ruin."

"No' sae much of a ruin either," was the reply. "A man could weel live there in comfort, I'm thinking, and it is the vera place for the unlawfu' act of smuggling—but for ane thing——"

"Oh! Smuggling!" repeated Hermione, with an unconscious sigh of relief. And then she wondered why she had experienced relief, and what it was that subconsciously she had feared. "My secretary

Mr. Bray, told me something about the rumour that was going about."

"Ah, then you've heeared tell of it?" The inspector's eyes were sharply on her face now, as though indeed there was something suspicious in the fact that she had heard of the rumour at all.

"Only stupid gossip," she replied. "How could anyone carry on smuggling up here? Where would they land? Where store the contraband goods? And why go so far north?"

"That's juist what has been a sair puzzle to me," agreed Inspector Mackay, with another keen glance at the beautiful face before him. "There's a place for landing, sure enough, but the only room that has a roof to it would no' be hiding a pair of silk stockings —for any passer-by could see into it. And yet that there's something queer hereaboots I'm sure. Lights have been seen far out at sea, and there's tales of a motor-car that gangs from nowhere along the Ardenmore road, once in a month or mair. And who would be coming along there onless 'twas to come to this house, and the place has been empty for ower twa year."

"A motor-car been seen?" echoed Hermione incredulously. "It must have been my secretary who was up here a fortnight ago, and two or three times before that when he came to see the house and attend to business matters. No one else would come here, nor is there anywhere else to go to but here, and I'm sure no one could live in the old tower—at least, I think not."

And here she paused. Once only had she seen the

place in question, once when Dominic Arden had taken her there to show her his little den where he could look out upon the sea and dream his dreams without fear of interruption. The room was bare but habitable, boasting a chair, a table, and the one outstanding and somewhat incongruous feature—a large clock, in appearance resembling a grandfather's clock, but built into the wall and—so he had told her—placed there over a hundred years ago by an eccentric member of the Ardenmore family, and the secret of which, he had added—"It has taken me a month to discover, and when I have shown it to you then we two will be the only people living who know it." But he had gone before the secret could be told, and in any case she had never pondered very deeply over it, and thought of it only as one of his odd whimsies. For in some things Dominic had been a romantic, adventurous boy at heart. Now this strange talk of smuggling, and the possibilities of anyone making the place their headquarters for that nefarious purpose, was awakening all those almost forgotten memories—trifles which, compared to the one stark tragedy of his death, were not worthy of a thought.

For to her, Dominic Arden was in very truth dead even though—miracle of miracles!—he might actually have escaped death on the battlefields of Flanders. The message which he had sent to her by his friend, Frank Daneham had been sufficient proof of that. For Dominic was not the man to bring his own disgrace and crime into her life. And though she had tried by every means in her power—aided by that true friend, Frank Daneham—to get news of him, either

from returned prisoners of war or through any other channel, she had failed, and so peferred to think of him as dead and to live on the memory of the past.

And now this wretched Inspector of Police was undoing all the work that Time had achieved for her, and reawakening in her soul doubt and dread and a fearful hope. For of all men Dominic Arden was the only soul who knew of some secret connected with that tower, and it seemed, by what this man was saying, that something was going on there that needed explanation.

"You're thinking that a man could dwell there?" asked Mackay, sharply—suspiciously.

She pulled herself together. "I can't say, it is ages since I saw the place."

"Weel, mebbe they could, but there's nobody there now, for I bided there mysel' the whole of last night, and have been searching the day lang, yet neither mark nor track nor trace of living men can I see."

"Then why make any more fuss?" demanded Hermione. "The report must have been false, and why, in any case, come to me about it?"

"Because I have to warrn you, ma'am, that I shall be placing a man on the watch from to-morrow night, and also to ask you to be mindfu' yoursel' of anything that might strike you as queer or unusual, and to send worrd to me at headquarters."

"But what on earth could *I* see?" she cried, in a bewildered voice. Was *this* the peace she had come for, then? To be bothered by police in this uncalled-for manner? "Besides," she went on, as a happy idea occurred to her, "I am not on the telephone."

"No, ma'am, but you have a chauffeur and a car, and a note from you would bring me at once, which would be quicker than driving the twenty odd miles to Ardenmore Post Office, where you could send a telegram. But it's not that I'm asking you so much to help as that I warrn you of possible danger. For the auld tower is but half a mile awa', and this house is a likely place for a hunted man to come to, and I'm thinking anything micht happen, if what I suspect is actually true."

"But you have just told me, Inspector, that you have found nothing suspicious," persisted Hermione, who was beginning to feel bored with his pertinacity, and rather angry that he should trouble her with the matter at all.

"Nay, ma'am, I have found naething for which I was looking, in the matter of smugglers' caves or places where the goods can be dumped, but I have found something else, and I wondered, mebbe, if you could throw any light upon it." He put a hand into his tunic pocket, drew out a tiny scrap of torn paper and gave it to her.

Phillimore had placed a lamp on a table in the wide passage, for it had grown dark by then, and crossing over to it, she held the paper to the light.

One sentence was written there in block letters, and it was a date.

Monday, December the 3rd, 1917.

Blankly she stared at the now blurred characters. For a sudden nameless fear had seized her, an

exquisite, torturing, impossible hope. On this tiny scrap of paper was written the date on which Dominic Arden had walked out of that Flanders hut to his death. A date that was for ever graven on her heart. A date known only to four people in the world: to herself—to Frank Daneham—to Colonel Bessington, and—to Dominic Arden.

Why, then, was it here on this tiny scrap of paper? And what did it mean? It was a dirty, crumpled bit of paper, and had apparently been torn out of a note-book. By whom?

With a tremendous effort she stifled the cry that rose to her lips, forced her voice to its normal tone, and turning to the inspector, asked a question.

"Where did you find it?"

"On the shingle, juist below the auld tower," was the reply.

CHAPTER IV

A LIGHT IN THE TOWER

In the silence that ensued the dropping of the proverbial pin might have sounded like the knell of doom. But the loud slamming of a door upstairs echoing harshly through the old house broke the tense situation and brought Hermione out of her trance-like state and back to the world of reality.

For Hermione had a vivid imagination and that one little sentence uttered by the matter-of-fact police officer had conjured up an instantaneous vision of the possible explanation of that tiny scrap of paper and the place where it had been found. Only to be shattered at its birth by the sound of the banging door which had brought her back to that world of realities, and a return to logical, common sense reasoning. What a fool she had been to have permitted that impossible thought to enter her mind even for a moment. For of the four souls who knew that date, Dick Bessington and Frank Daneham were in London and therefore could not have dropped the bit of paper where it had been found. She had not even been to the spot and therefore most certainly had not dropped it there—and Dominic Arden was dead.

Aware that the eyes of the stolid inspector were watching her face keenly, she heard—with intense

relief—the quick tread of high-heeled shoes in the passage, and turned to Iza Marsh as she approached.

"I'm so glad you've come," was all she found herself able to say.

"Why, my dear? What's the—?" The plump lady stopped abruptly and stared hard at Inspector Mackay. "Why! God bless my soul, child! Not in trouble with the police already, surely?"

A broad grin widened the mouth of the policeman.

"Juist a matter of beeseness, ma'am," he said.

"Business?" she retorted, seeing at a quick glance the expression on Hermione's white face. "Good gracious me! Don't the man know that we've only just landed here after a tiring and completely disgusting twenty-eight hours' journey and that we're dog-tired and want to be eating our dinner, not discussing business—especially police business?"

"I juist looked in on my way back to Locharbie," replied the inspector, apologetically, "in orrder to acquaint the leddie with the queer seetuation with which we are confronted——"

"Queer fiddlesticks!" snapped Mrs. Marsh, brusquely. "Whatever the situation and however queer it may be, won't it wait till morning?"

"It's all right, Iza, I know all about it," replied Hermione, getting a hold upon herself once more. "It's about smuggling, you know."

"Smuggling! Gracious me, child! I thought that was all my eye and Betty Martin. Do you mean that there is real, live, honest-to-God smuggling going on here? But how intensely thrilling and exciting!"

It's a' that, ma'am" observed the inspector, dryly,

"and mebbe 'twill be something mair besides before we've feenished with it." He turned abruptly to Hermione, as being easier to deal with than this plump, sharp-voiced and voluble lady. "Then you'll no' be able to tell me onything aboot that wee scrap of paper?" he asked.

"I? How should I?" she replied, wondering if this man might have known what happened on that date and was trying to connect her with it in some way.

"Only that your secretary man might ha' let it drop whiles he was inspecting the place pairhaps."

"Oh, no he knows nothing—I mean, he couldn't possibly have dropped it. It can't really mean anything at all, and can surely be accounted for in some very simply way."

"What's that, my dear? Another scrap of paper? I thought the Teutons held the monopoly for that kind of thing," put in her companion briskly.

"I'll tell you about it presently," said Hermione, quickly. "Do you want it back, Inspector?"

For answer he held out his hand.

"'Twill be best in my keeping," he said, as he took it from Hermione. It was, after all, of no use to her The block letters told her nothing, and the words themselves had long since been branded on her memory. There was no need for anyone or anything to remind her of that date.

"Then I'll be going," said Mackay, "and it's likely I'll see you to-morrow, ma'am. And if you're wise you'll keep the doors locked and the shutters barred, and if you hear or see anything suspeecious, you'll

know where to send a message. I'm bringing one of my men back in the car in the morning."

He gave a perfunctory salute and let himself out through the front door. And as Hermione turned the big key in the lock Phillimore advanced down the passage and announced that dinner was ready.

"It's only cold, Iza, and we won't bother to change now," said Hermione, and, catching her friend by the arm, she led her to the rather large and gloomy dining-room—hardly warmed by the log and peat fire, and dimly lit by oil lamps.

"And now, my dear," said Iza Marsh, when at last Phillimore had gone and they were alone, "tell old Marshy all about it. You look as if you had seen a ghost or had a bad shock, so I know it's something more than this smuggling bosh that the man talked about."

"Perhaps it is—and yet common sense tells me that it is nothing—just an extraordinary coincidence," replied the other. "To begin with, the inspector came to warn me that he believes there have been people occupying the old tower and using it as a signalling base or something of that sort. But as he can't find any place where contraband goods could be hidden or stored, he is naturally puzzled and intends putting a man on guard to watch. Of course, he had to see me about that."

"Of course, indeed! And so I should think! Planting a beastly policeman on your grounds without by your leave or with your leave would have been a bit too thick. But you can't deceive me, child, it's not *that*

which has turned your cheeks so white, my dear. Come, tell me."

"He found something—" began Hermione, and suddenly choked.

Instantly Iza Marsh was by her side with an arm about her.

"There, my dear, never mind if you don't feel like telling me just now. Later on—any time."

"Oh no, I'll tell you, but it's ridiculous," cried the girl, with a sob in her voice. "Of course, it can be explained. But it gave me a terrible shock for a moment for you see, what he found was a tiny bit of paper lying on the shingle below the tower, and on it was written in block letters the—the—date that even you don't know of—the date when Dominic went out to his death. Monday, December the 3rd, 1917. Just that—nothing else. And there are only we four—he and I, and—and Colonel Bessington and Frank who know. You see now what I—dared to think—to hope —for a moment."

For once Iza Marsh was completely silent knowing, as she only could know, what Hermione must indeed have thought, have even hoped, and the tragedy of it shocked her into silence. She just held the girl—whom she loved as her own daughter—in her warm embrace, and with a violent effort restrained the hot tears that welled up into her eyes.

"My poor, dear child," she said, at last and further words completely failed her. But it was enough for Hermione.

"I see you understand," she said, "and—and—bless you for your sympathy, Marshy. But—but—I

was a fool, of course, I see that now. For the thing is utterly impossible. There *must* be some other explanation. There must!"

"And there is, I'm afraid" agreed the elder woman as she resumed her seat. "After all, there were many hundreds of other men who died on that date. And then again, it may have nothing to do with a date of death. It's just the queer coincidence of it that is—well—so queer Words fail me, my dear. I can find none adequate in which to express myself, except in curses on the head of that damned policeman for coming here and upsetting you like this."

"Oh no, Marshy, that's hardly fair. After all, it was his duty to come and see me about it.

"Duty? Yes, I suppose so. What a beastly upsetting thing duty can be, and—if it comes to that—generally is," grumbled the elder woman. "But seeing that he's done it and come and upset us all to his heart's content, what are we going to do about it? You can't allow smugglers to go smuggling all over your grounds, you know. What the deuce are you laughing at, child? That's a fact, isn't it?"

"Of course it is. It was only the way you put it, Marshy. I imagine that if there *is* smuggling going on, they'll confine themselves to one spot—only, somehow, I can't believe it's true."

"Well, it does seem odd and against Nature—so to speak—for people to dump their ill-gotten goods all this way up north. But, I suppose, being an outlandish part of the world makes it possible, anyway. And as for the signalling and so on, you know, my dear, that policemen don't see anything they ought to see unless

the thing's thrust under their noses. So this must be very obvious. On the other hand, if it's something they've no business to notice, they spot it right away. I presume the man searched the place thoroughly."

"Oh yes. He said so, and found nothing. But what, I wonder, did he expect to find?"

"Well, presumably, I imagine, barrels of silk stockings and bales of brandy. No, I mean t'other way about. All the best smugglers go in for silk stockings and things of that sort. I believe they even sell 'em on barrows in Whitechapel for an old song. So they must be got somehow free of duty. It's always a puzzle to me why this wretched Government go for our underwear. They'd kick up the devil's own fuss if we went about in bare legs to spite 'em, wouldn't they?"

"Well, as far as that goes, we might as well, for all the difference it would make to the look of our legs," replied Hermione, smiling, and her friend was thankful to see the smile which she had been at some pains to create. Anything was welcome that would take her mind off that wretched bit of paper which that disgusting policeman had gone and found. And what, by the way, was the meaning of it? Something quite obviously simple if she could only think of it. As it was—well, it was certainly odd.

"At any rate, my dear," went on Iza Marsh, as they rose from the table, "we need not bother about it tonight. If the man found nothing else it is quite palpable that there was no one and nothing to find, for his eyes gave one the impression of being able to bore through stone walls. So if you're not too tired, child, take me round the house and show me any of the

rooms that are showable. And the sooner Messrs. Thingummy and Thingummy install the electric light here, the better. I foresee that we have to trundle a bracket lamp round with us in order to see anything at all."

"They are going to start in a month's time," replied Hermione "I am also corresponding with gardners, and think I have found three good ones. And then, you know, I am buying what was always called the Home Farm, which the present farmer wants to sell, so we shall really be self-supporting."

Iza Marsh kept a cheerful flow of conversation as they visited room after room, suggesting alterations here, changes there. And when, finally, they parted at Hermione's bedroom door, the elder woman clasped her for a moment in her arms.

"Now, no sitting up and worrying and thinking, child," she said. "Forget all about this and remember only that if you worry you make fat old Marshy miserable, and you have no earthly right to do that."

"Nor any intention, darling," was the reply. "My one worry is that you may not be comfortable."

"Trust me for that," said Mrs. Marsh, with a fat chuckle. "No pussy-cat was ever in it with me for obtaining personal comfort at any price."

But though Hermione had, as she promised, ceased to worry, it was a long time before she got into bed. For her window looked out on to an opening into the dense mass of fir trees, that more or less surrounded the old house, and at the end of this opening, half a mile away, she could, she knew, in the daylight, catch a glimpse of the top of the ruined tower. In consequence of this, ever and anon as she undressed, she

found her steps going towards that window, attracted by something she could not define—either a fear of what she might see, or a wish—a faint hope that there would be anything to see. And every time she looked and saw the same black darkness she experienced a faint sensation of disappointment—called herself a fool for her pains; yet, always, was back again peering through the curtains. For what?

How could there be anything to see when she herself had scoffed at the idea that there could be anything to see at all? The inspector had seen no one—had been on the watch all the night before and had seen nothing and no one, and if *his* keen, experienced eyes had failed to detect anything suspicious, how and why should she? All the same . . .

Her bed stood directly facing the window, and before she finally got into it she drew back the window curtains.

If, she thought, there should be anything to see, she could see it from where she lay. And then she laughed at the sheer folly of such a thought. Yet she left the curtains as they were, and she lay staring out of the dark window, her eyes seeing nothing but that crumpled bit of paper lying on the shingle, and thrown or dropped there—by whom? But after a time even that vivid picture faded from her tired vision and grew dim, and at last she fell asleep. But it was an uneasy sleep into which dreams would come—dreams that had long been strangers to her—and the dreams concerned that date, written in block letters on that tiny scrap of paper. So that when she awoke suddenly, she sat up and found the tears streaming down her

face, and a name on her lips, while her arms were held out towards a figure that had but a moment ago been clasped within them.

"Dominic! Oh, Dominic!"

She dashed the blinding tears from her eyes and found herself staring blankly at the uncurtained window.

The next instance she was out of bed and across the room, had flung the casement open, and, as the cool night air touched her face, she gave a hoarse, startled cry.

Away in the distance, shining clear in the darkness, and high up in the sky, there burned a bright red light, and even as she watched, immovable and tense with excitement, it died, then shone out again a vivid green, to be as quickly changed once more to red, and red for a minute it stayed, until, with a flicker, it was out, and only black impenetrable darkness prevailed.

A signal, and from the top of the tower! What did it mean?

With a faint cry she drew the curtains, lit the candle and in the dim light began to fling on her clothes.

CHAPTER V

SMUGGLERS?

IZA MARSH had also a distrubed night, but not for the same reason as Hermione. There was only one thing in the world she was afraid of, and that was mice, and apparently to her vivid imagination—where these noxious vermin were concerned—the room was alive with them.

"And not a cat in the place, I'll bet my boots," she muttered to herself, as she scrambled on to the sofa and from that place of vantage began to undress. "If I'd left my fur coat behind and brought a live cat instead, I should have shown more common sense. We'll have to get one in to-morrow." As though, indeed, such things were to be found growing conveniently and in abundance, in the derelict garden. But fear had rendered her far beyond logic or reason.

She got into bed, somehow, and left two candles burning on the table beside her, and, having started a very exciting book on the journey, she began to read from where she had unwillingly left off.

She read for an hour and a half, glanced at her watch, saw that it was long past twelve o'clock, and was in the act of blowing out the candles when a noise in the passage outside made her suddenly desist from blowing and sit up instead.

Someone was walking as silently as possible, on boards that creaked badly at nearly every step, past her door; and as no one save Hermione and herself slept in that part of the house, she reasoned that, unless it was a burglar, it must certainly be Hermione. She had no fear of burglars, only mice, and all fear of mice vanished as soon as the possibility of burglars came into her head.

Considering her bulk, Iza Marsh was an active woman, and a second later her door stood opened and she herself was out in the passage.

It was no thief after all, but Hermione, and Hermione fully dressed and carrying a lighted candle.

"My dear child!" cried Iza, and the girl stopped and turned. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Hush! Don't make a noise," said Hermione in a whisper, and in another moment had joined the elder woman. "I have just seen red and green lights flashed from the top of the tower, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"*You* are going to find out?" ejaculated the other, aghast. "Are you mad, child? Supposing it's the smuggling people. If they see you they'll murder you! Get back to bed at once and don't be silly. You probably dreamt that you saw red and green lights, I'm sure you're lucky if you saw nothing else," she added, grimly as she recalled her own visions while undressing.

"No I didn't. I saw it as plain as I see you now and I am going. I'm not a bit afraid and won't let anyone see me. And I *must* try and find out what it is. Please don't try and hinder me, Marshy, I've just *got* to go."

"Very well," was the grim reply, "knowing you as I do, my dear, I realize the futility of argument. So —I'll just have to come with you."

"Nonsense, you can't—not like that."

" I don't mean to go like this," snapped the other. "It won't take a minute to slip on a coat and skirt over my nightie and get into some thick stockings and shoes. For go alone you shall not."

"But it's half a mile away!" protested Hermione, though now to unheeding ears, for the stout lady was already back in her room, and hastily she followed.

"Just put a candle on the floor, my dear, to frighten away the mice, and then I can get along quickly."

"Mice! Why, they're only in the walls," said the girl laughing in spite of herself.

"Then the sooner the walls are full of cats, too, the better," was the retort. "There, I'm ready, and I can walk as fast as you can when I choose, so you won't waste time through me. But I'll take this with me," she added, as she took a tiny revolver from her dressing-case and slipped it in her pocket. "It won't be the first time I have used it, either—if I have to let it off in self-defence to-night. My poor old man and I went to some queer places at times. Come along, child. I hope the worst we'll get will be double pneumonia."

Silently the two descended the stairs and were soon outside in the cool night air.

"I've got my latchkey," whispered Hermione, as she tucked her arm in that of her friend, and the two struck into an overgrown path that led through the wood and straight towards the tower. "I also brought an electric torch," she added.

"Which would be of more use if the power was turned on now," observed the other, dryly, "for then we shouldn't fracture our skulls against these trees. It's a blessing we are neither of us afflicted with nerves, or subject to hysterics, for I never saw anything quite so grizzly as this wood in the whole of my life. It's also rather a comfort to realize that we are both insane and not afraid to own it."

Never was half a mile so quickly traversed; and towards the end of it the elder woman was more than a little out of breath.

"We are close by now," whispered Hermione, encouragingly. She had switched off the light some time ago for fear it might be seen by whoever was in the tower. "The wood and the path end here and there is nothing but soft grass right up to the tower. Now don't you think it would be best for you to wait here and let me go by myself? I promise to call you if anything is wrong, but I don't think we shall find anyone, for there is no light and not a sound even."

"I'm glad to hear it, my dear," replied Iza Marsh, crisply, "we should have looked pretty if there had been; and you can certainly go on if you like, but I'm coming, too, though I can't go as quickly as you can up this hill. It's a blessing we don't have to go in for tight lacing these days or I should not have been able to come at all."

So Hermione set off to climb to the steep incline, and presently she was beneath the wall of the old round tower, which, now that her eyes were accustomed to the darkness, she could see clearly rising above her. She paused a moment and listened.

There *was* a sound, after all, faint and rhythmic, but she could not for the moment make out what it was. Quickly she rounded the tower and came out upon the edge of the cliff, which dropped sheer down to the beach below, but in whose rocky sides a winding path was cut, ending in steps up to the door of the tower by which she now found herself standing. And now the sound she had heard was quite distinct and she recognized it for that of the throbbing of an engine. And as she listened and the sound grew more faint, she realized that it came from a motor-boat fast leaving the shore. There were no lights, nothing but the chug-chug of the engine, and her beating heart sounded to her straining ears almost as loud as the throbbing of the engine itself.

Then, presently, as she watched, there came the tiny flicker of light far out, and she understood the meaning of the signals she had seen from her window. Someone in the tower must have signalled a warning to a ship out at sea, represented now by that tiny light. Then followed a summons to send a boat ashore to take off whoever was there. It was true, then, that smuggling was going on there, and someone must have been in the tower all the time, even when the inspector was there watching on the night before. They must have known of his departure and then signalled to be taken off to the ship while there was a chance. It was all clear, that part of it, quite clear. What was not so clear was where these people had been hidden, and what, actually, they were doing.

She wondered, as she stood there, if she dare turn on her light and have a look into the tower room.

There was the risk that someone would notice it out at sea and the smugglers return to molest her. But on second thought she knew this fear to be groundless, for, having got safely away, they would not be likely to return and risk capture—possibly by the police who, for all they knew, might have come back in force. So, nerving herself to face and find whatever might be there, she switched on the light, found the iron handle of the old oak door, pushed it open, and flashed her light inside.

The room was empty, save, as she had remembered it, for the table and chair that Dominic had used and the sight of which brought that horrible aching lump to her throat, as did anything that reminded her of him.

She went in and flashed the light round the walls.

There in its place in the wall, that was built into the rocky cliff itself, was the old clock, staring down at her with its many dials, and its rusty and seemingly immovable hands. But it told no time, and could tell her nothing else that went on there in the old tower—though could it but have spoken, what a tale it might have told. So, with a sigh for that day when Dominic Arden had shown it to her and hinted at a secret connected with it, and which now she could never learn, she turned away, gave a hurried glance at the little door which opened on to winding steps leading to the top of the tower, and wondered if she should go up.

As she hesitated she heard footsteps outside and presently Iza Marsh was with her panting and almost speechless.

"No one, of course?" she gasped.

"No, not a soul nor a sign of anything," was the reply. "But now that you are here I'll just go up to the top of the tower and see if there is anything to be seen there."

"Gracious, child! Don't do that!" exclaimed the other. "Supposing there *is* someone up there!"

"I think they've all gone," said Hermione. "In fact, I'm almost sure, so I'm not so brave as it looks, after all. But they may have left traces, so I feel I ought to go and see. Wait for me here and don't move."

Then she climbed the narrow winding steps and came out upon the tiny ramparts where the sea breeze blew coldly on her face. But here also there was nothing, and since there was neither sign of a match nor drop of oil splashed on the stone floor or battlements, she guessed that the signals she had seen must have been from a large electric lamp.

The chug-chug of the departing boat was audible still, and she hurried down to her friend who was alone in the dark.

"Nothing," she said. "No one there, nor yet a sign of anyone having been there."

"What does it all mean, my dear?" asked the elder woman.

"Hush! Listen. Do you hear that?"

There had been silence out at sea for a moment, but now once more Hermione heard the rhythmic throb of engines, and more powerful engines than she had heard before.

"It's a large motor-boat," she whispered. "And a

smaller one came in to fetch whoever it was away, returned to the other waiting one out there, and now they are off. What *can* it mean but smuggling, Marshy?"

"It's certainly a motor-boat we hear," was the reply, "and if you say you heard one going away from here, it can mean only one thing—smuggling. Well, well, well, and at my time of life to be hunting after a pack of smugglers! And now, what do you propose to do, my dear? I mean, of course, after we have retired to our downies and are once more conducting ourselves like sane and normal females."

"I can't tell you now," was the reply, "I feel too bewildered to think coherently. Of course, something has got to be done, that's certain, but we shall be better able to know where we are if we can get a good night's sleep. . . ."

"At any rate, those smuggling beggers shan't frighten us out of that," agreed Iza Marsh.

But there was little sleep for Hermione that night, even after she found herself once more between the sheets, this time with curtains drawn and in a darkened room.

For there were questions which hammered at her brain and would neither let her think clearly nor yet find oblivion in sleep. And the questions were these: how, in the first place, did those people who had been at the tower that night know of its existence there? And how did they know also of the secret hiding-place which it held? For it was obvious that they must have known and had therefore been told of it by someone who knew of it. And who knew of it? To

her knowledge there was only one man who did. Dominic Arden had told her there was a secret attached to the old place, that he alone knew of and had worked for months to discover. He told her this on the day before he left for France, and three months later he had died without returning home. His father and mother were ignorant of what the secret was, he had definitely told her so. And then the place had been sold to a wealthy profiteer who had made no use of it, and had scarcely ever been there.

Betty MacIvor and her husband—who had died a year ago—had been the caretakers. But it was a wild outlandish part of the world and led to nowhere, therefore few, if any, strangers ever came that way. And this tale of smuggling had been lately started. Surely had anyone lived in the tower a light must have been seen at some time before this, but it was only lately that suspicion had arisen.

What, then, was she to think, save that Dominic Arden was still the only man who knew the secret of the tower, and therefore that Dominic was alive and had come there—for what? Smuggling? Lawbreaking? The thought revolted her and yet would not leave her. For she knew his reckless, dare-devil spirit that side of his nature which was so curiously unlike the other tender, artistic side that could sit and dream and put his fancies into wonderful words on paper. There had always been two Dominic Ardens—the man who adored and had married her and in whose tender arms she had nestled, and the man who had committed murder, recklessly, in a moment of ungovernable rage because her fair name had been

befouled by a notorious libertine, and who was therefore, in his eyes, no longer fit to live.

It was the tender, adoring Dominic Arden who would stay away, breaking his heart sooner than drag her into his shame and misery. But it was the Dominic Arden who had done murder, who would turn reckless and bitterly defiant if anything served to awaken that bitter and reckless temper. Had that thing happened? Was it possible that he had also sought her, as she had—fruitlessly—sought for him?

Rapidly she surveyed the years that had passed. Her terrible illness after the news of his death had been broken to her; her age-long recovery, lengthened by poverty. Then her fruitless search—in case, after all, he might not be dead. After that her search for work; her engagement as companion to Lady Maude Haslop—an angel of goodness if ever there was one; her travels abroad where, in Rome, she had first met Adolf Rodenberg, His constant pursuit of her—Lady Maude's advice which ended, at last, in capitulation, and her final goal—the buying back of Ardenmore, a sufficient motive for her act. And then at long last, release and her journey here.

Was it possible, reviewing all these past events, that Dominic, too, if alive, had been seeking her, and without daring to return to his home, had heard of her marriage, had believed she had forgotten him, and, in utter recklessness and anger, had indeed returned, but this time to flout the law of the land which would hang him if it could—in the only way he knew? It seemed, on the face of it, the only possible solution. And if it were so she could not find it

in her heart to reproach him. It would explain so many things, too. For if he had heard that the place had been sold once more, he would return, perhaps, to get possession of those pictures and the books he loved.

Would it explain, too, that scrap of paper? Had he dropped it there knowing who had bought his home, in order to remind her of something she had perhaps forgotten?

No, that was too cruel, he would never do that. He could not know who had bought his home, he might not even have heard whom she had married. In any case there was some other explanation for that paper, and—finally, and after all—was she not quite mad even to suppose that he was alive at all?

That was her last thought before finally she fell asleep in the grey hours of the morning.

But when, at breakfast, her friend asked if she was going to send word to Inspector Mackay about the occurrences of the night, her reply was decided.

"No," she said, emphatically, "I am not going to tell him a word about it. But I *am* going to wire to Frank Daneham and ask him to come here at once."

"And that my dear," replied the elder woman, "is the most sensible thing I have ever known you do."

After which enigmatical reply Hermione was singularly thoughtful and silent. For did it mean that Iza Marsh, in her heart of hearts, believed what she once more was striving not to believe? If not, for a law-abiding woman like Iza, it was a singular way of helping Inspector Mackay in his investigations.

CHAPTER VI

A FRIEND IN NEED

WHEN Frank Daneham got into his sleeper at Euston Station, Henry Addison was standing on the platform seeing him off.

"If it had not been that my wife's been by her lonesome all these months while I was away in the wilds, I'd have come with you and begged the hospitality of your lovely lady Hermione," he said with a smile; "as it is, I'm a fixture here, and can only beg for frequent letters."

"Right, old man, you shall hear anything that happens. Of course, I know nothing. Only got that wire asking me to go to her at once—that she was in trouble and needed me and so, of course, that was enough for me. I just wired for a day's grace to put my house—I mean my studio—in order, and here I am, going into goodness knows what. For you can take it from me that if Hermione says there is trouble, then trouble there is, and she is far to unselfish to drag me away from my work unless there is good cause for so doing. But for the life of me I can't imagine what it is, unless my queer dreams or imaginings have come true and she has found traces of young Arden."

"But would she call that trouble?"

"It would, of course, depend on what the traces

are," was the reply. "Halloa! There's that confounded bore Alec Crosby, and he spots me. Do you know him?"

"Not I, who is he?"

"He and his brother made a cart-load of money in the War, tinned stuffs or something: pushers, and got in with people. The brother's not a bad sort; straight, I believe; both bounders and this one a bore."

As he finished speaking a rather stout, florid-faced man in light tweeds came towards them, stopped at sight of Daneham, and came up to the window. His tweed cap was pushed into a voluminous pocket, and the fair, rather curly hair was blowing about in a slight evening breeze. He grinned as he leant across the open window.

"You off salmon fishing, too?" he inquired.

"N-no—that is yes, of course. Where are you going?" Daneham's manner was not cordial, but the other appeared not to notice it and continued to grin vacuously.

"Stayin' with my brother, John. He's got a tidy little place not many miles from Locharbie, and about twenty miles from Ardenmore. You know Ardenmore? Place the rich widow Rodenberg bought lately. Never heard such a rummy go in my life. What a woman of her sort wants to go and buy a rotten old tumbledown barn of a place for like Ardenmore, beats me hollow. Not got a telephone even. Burn candles and live on grass. Must have gone dotty."

"I don't think so. Besides, she is a friend of mine, and I happen to be going up to stay with her."

The grin on the other's face died for a second, but reappeared again almost directly.

"Oh, sorry. No offence, mate. I was only speaking the mind and airing the views of the plain man in the street. There's no accounting for tastes, never was, never will be—as the waiter said when he—Ah! There's my luggage. Thought the porter had pinched it, he, he!" he chuckled inanely. Well, so long. We shall be quite a lively party up at the Glen. Lots of old pals going, among 'em old Dick Bessington. Know him, don't you? Everyone knows Dick Bessington, smartest looking fellow in town."

"Oh, so he's going, is he?" asked Frank Daneham, surprised out of his usual boredom into asking a question of this man.

"'Tis yourself that sez it, me bhoy. He's going, and going to stay. Friend of old John's. Can't say he fills me with any degree of enthusiasm, myself. A bit sticky, heavy in hand on occasion. Comes the blinkin' colonel over a feller at times. Forgets he's left the service—which was the rottenest thing he ever did, by the way, and that's that, and it's his funeral and not mine. However, as there's no war on just now, it don't matter really, I suppose. Finest revolver shot in Europe; too, I wonder he lets his talent go rusty living here, and don't go out to the U. S. A. for a bit of practice. He—he! Well, time goes and I see the folk busy scrambling into their little nests. So good-bye, see you at our next changing place. And in the meantime to dine—to drink, and then to sleep." And with a wave of his stick he walked dawn the platform.

"Damnation take the fellow!" said Daneham. "What's he going there for?"

"Who, Crosby?"

"No, Bessington."

"Well, I suppose salmon fishing, too."

"No, no. I mean—well, you know Hermione told me before she went north that he had promised to leave her alone for a month, and now it appears he is going to stay twenty miles away from her."

Addison smiled.

"You've got a bee in your bonnet, old man," he said. "If he does go and stay twenty miles off, it doesn't necessarily mean that he is going to molest the lady. What's the idea? Do you think he's—well—not playing straight?"

"I don't know what to think, I don't like Dick Bessington, never have liked him, and as I told you, I always have that feeling that he suspects me of knowing something more of the Arden affair than I have owned to. Perhaps it's my bad conscience. Anyway, if he distrusts me, all I can say is that the distrust is mutual. Ah! We're off. Well, good-bye, old chap. I'll write you if anything awkward happens, and I suppose I can count on you if I want a pal's help?"

"To the death," was the reply, as the thin, rather weather-beaten killer of big game wrung his departing friend's hand. Then he turned and walked down the empty platform, and Frank Daneham flung himself on his comfortable seat and fell to thinking again.

What did she want him for? What could have happened? It was only on the day after her arrival

that she had sent for him. Surely nothing very serious could have occurred in that short time. And yet it was possible and, in consequence, he was anxious and worried. One thing only had he not confided to his friend, Addison, and that was the fact that his feeling for Hermione Rodenberg was far more than simple friendship. He had loved her—hopelessly as he knew —every since he had known her, and no one save himself knew his secret. Not for the world would he have let her see what he felt, though often he had wondered if she guessed. If she had she showed no sign but always treated him as a dear friend in whom she had absolute trust and confidence. She knew there was nothing he would not do for her whatever it might cost him, and he knew that she was aware of this and was glad to feel that she had no scruples in making use of him whenever she needed him. It was an unspoken, understood compact between them. And he liked to be made use of by her and was happiest when she needed him.

And now he was hurrying on a journey of over seven hundred miles to answer her call for aid, and he had not the slightest idea for what she wanted him, only that she did want him, and that was all-sufficient.

Over twenty-four hours later he got out of the local train at Ardenmore station and found her waiting on the platform.

"Ah, my dear good friend." Hermione held out both hands which were seized in a warm clasp. "How good of you to come, and I feel such a brute for dragging you away from your beloved London and your work. But what was I to do?"

"Nothing but what you have done," he replied. "Are you alone? Driving yourself?"

"Yes, quite alone. I thought I could tell you all about it on our way home. The grizzly porter has put your luggage in, so we can go."

"Now," said Frank Daneham, as the car started on its twenty mile journey, "tell me all about it. I know it must be serious or you wouldn't have sent for me."

"It is," she replied, and told him, from the very beginning, when her secretary had hinted at the rumour of smuggling, on to the visit of Inspector Mackay.

He listened intently to her story without speaking, and then: "And you discovered something—after he went?"

"Yes, at about eleven o'clock, from my bedroom window I saw a red light from the top of the tower, followed by a green one and then red again, so I dressed and——"

"Good God! You don't tell me that you went out there by yourself?" exclaimed Daneham in horrified tones.

"No, Marshy heard me and insisted on going with me. She even took her revolver."

"And a deuced sensible thing to do, too. Why! My dear girl! It was sheer madness for you to have gone at all. What on earth possessed you? Even if there *were* smugglers at work, what business was it of yours? Especially when such grave danger was attached to it."

"Well, as it happens it *was* my business," she

replied gravely. "You see, I haven't told you everything yet. I only wanted first to make it clear that there *was* something odd going on at the tower. And though actually I saw nothing when we got there, I heard the sound of a motor-engine out at sea, a boat, I thought, taking whoever was there out to a ship, or probably a large motor-boat, for later I heard that, too, going away."

"Yes, yes. I realize all that, my dear," cried Daneham. "But tell me what possessed you to go there at all? What motive had you in feeling so much interest, that you would run a grave risk of that sort? I confess it's beyond me at present."

"Well, you see, the inspector found something when he was searching the place," she replied, slowly. "It gave me a dreadful shock when he showed it to me for it was a bit of paper on which was written a date, and the date was Monday, December the 3rd, 1917. Now do you see why I had to go when I saw that light?"

The man sitting beside her could not have prevented the violent start he gave as he heard her statement any more than he could help the ejaculation that fell from his lips.

"Good God!" And then silence, while both stared with unseeing eyes at the grey road before them, neither daring to speak, both fearing least they should say too much if they did.

It was the man who spoke first, and his voice was dry and husky.

"Poor girl. Poor little woman." And there was that in the voice which told Hermione at last what

she had secretly feared and now knew for a certainty. And her heart ached for him and marvelled, too, at the wonderful self-restraint, which had kept his love for her a secret until now. The next instant she had turned her head, and for a moment smiled bravely into his working face.

"And so you, too, have believed what I have begun to believe?" she said.

Silence again, while he chose his words.

"If I said yes to that," he began, "I should convict myself of a grave crime in not having told you of my belief before you married Rodenberg. But I cannot truthfully say that I did, not at least until lately—for some utterly unaccountable reason. And even now, after what you have told me, reason and common sense tell me that such an idea is impossible, and that this written date—extraordinary coincidence though it may be—has nothing to do with poor Dominic Arden. Yet I understand how you must feel about it, and knowing this now, I can't conceive of your doing anything else except what you did in going out to investigate that night. It must have been an appalling shock for you, little woman.

"And it wasn't only that," she went on. "You see, before all this happened, I had gone into the turret room at the house—the one he used as his den—and I missed the pictures from the walls, and his favourite books from their shelves. They were all there down in the inventory, for Mr. Bray showed it to me, and I knew that the old Ardens had let everything go when they sold the house. They kept nothing even of his, and you know I was ill for so long and had no chance

to ask for them for myself. And it was an added joy to me to think that I was buying them all back, and a great shock when I found them gone that evening."

"Yes, I see that. And you account for it, how?"

"Well, I thought that if that paper meant anything connected with him, then it was possible that he had been here and taken those things away, knowing that the house was sold again and he might not have another chance."

"It's possible of course, but—" Daneham shook his head. "Can you for one moment believe that he would—granted that he is alive—risk life and liberty, to say nothing of chucking his honour to the winds, to embark in a lawless, criminal enterprise, such as smuggling? My dear girl, the thing's impossible."

"Oh, but I disagree with you there," she cried. "I *do* believe that he would do that, and worse if he felt completely up against it. I mean, for instance, if he heard I had married and misconstrued my motives."

"But Hermione, my dear, it is nine years since he went out of our lives. Surely he had time to try and get into touch with you had he wanted to. And seeing that he did not, surely he can't feel aggrieved if you —thinking him actually dead—chose to marry again."

"Oh, yes, I know all that, but how do you know all the circumstances? Look how Fate treated me. For a whole year I was dead to the world. Later, I had to look out for the means to live. Then Lady Maude took me with her over the world. In all that time he may have come to find me. Who knows what may have happened? And so it may be with him."

Daneham shook his head.

"No," he said. "With him it was quite different. When he left me that night he gave me definitely to understand, and also to convey to you, that he was dead, dead to you and to everyone. That meant that, whatever happened, he would never return to his old life, never bring those he loved into his own troubles. In a way he was right, for time heals and it was best for you to think of him really dead than to imagine what might happen did he return again and meet his punishment. No, my dear, that message was a message to you, telling you that you were free to live your own life, and had no more concern with him. He would not, therefore, feel any anger or bitterness at your marrying again, of that I am sure. I am equally sure that he would not take part in a criminal smuggling adventure."

"There I disagree, though I admit that you are probably right in the rest. I believe that the devil that is in him would just glory in doing something unlawful of that kind. Who knows what he may have been doing in all these years? Besides, I can't look upon smuggling as a crime, somehow. It seems to me quite permissible to try and outwit the law, if the law puts such heavy taxes on things as to almost strangle trade. I should just glory in doing it myself."

Daneham laughed.

"How like a woman," he said. "I often wonder what odd twist in their reasoning powers it is which can make them frown at one sort of crime—theft, let us say—and smile at another—equally reprehensible in the eyes of the law—smuggling. Look, for instance, how many otherwise reputable females have been

caught by the Customs officers actually smuggling on their own account, and who are, I feel sure extremely indignant at being hauled up and heavily fined, and not in the least ashamed of being caught in committing a felony. No, my dear, it won't do. Smuggling is theft of what is lawfully due to the Government, there are no two ways about it. And if Dominic is alive and is embarking on such an enterprise, then he has changed very much from the lad who walked out that night to meet his fate, and who renounced what he held more dear than life itself, because it would be best for her in the end. No, no. I have too much faith in the dear fellow to believe that, and since I can only give that as my verdict, then I think we must put away all thoughts of him in connection with this affair, and look upon that scrap of paper as sheer coincidence, and the vanishing of the pictures and books as a mistake on the part of whoever it was who drew up that inventory."

"No," said Hermione, decidedly. "Old Betty said they were here and that she didn't know who had taken them or how they had gone. And remember that Mr. Bray saw them, too."

"Well, then, let us leave it for the moment and look into this smuggling business, apart from any connection with poor old Dominic. How could anyone know of that tower and apparently of some secret place of concealment? For from your account, the smugglers must actually have been there when the inspector spent the night at the tower."

"Exactly. How could anyone know who was not told or shown by the one person who knew, and that

was Dominic? He was the only one who knew of it. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see that, but let us leave it for the moment. Now here again, how could they know when to come? I mean, know when the house was empty or the field clear? They couldn't know unless someone here—that is, actually on the premises—was giving secret information. Do you suppose then that they have all cleared out, or is one of them left behind? Or—which is probably more likely—is there someone living here who is in league with them?"

"That we shall have to find out," she replied. "At present there is a policeman on the watch, and, of course, since they have gone—frightened away by the inspector I suppose—he'll have his watch for nothing."

"Exactly. Well, we can see as to that. We might, in fact, set a trap. That is, get the police fellow off the place, and then see if they return. If they do we shall know that they are helped by some one in the place."

"Unless one of them is still in the tower," suggested Hermione, but to this Daneham disagreed.

"No, no. That's not possible. He would have to eat and drink and could not possibly come out if a watcher was actually in the tower. I think for the present, my dear, our best plan is to eliminate all thought of Dominic from our minds and treat the matter as a common criminal enterprise by a set of smugglers who will have to be trapped and punished. I am extraordinarily glad that you have sent for me, because I shall enjoy the excitement of it immensely, my only fear being that the fellows are scared off for good and all. I wonder, by the way,

how they get the goods away after landing them."

"In a car. I believe one has been seen going along the Ardenmore road and apparently vanishing into space."

"In that case the car may be there now" said Daneham gravely, "but where on earth do they keep it? Well, that is for us to investigate. I suppose you told nothing of your nights experience to the inspector?"

"Nothing. I simply couldn't."

"I see, and for the time, until we know more, I don't see how you can, but it looks rather like being accessories after the fact, doesn't it? However, there it is, and now for a bit of news from me, which I must tell you because you ought to know. I hear that Dick Bessington is going to stay at the Crosby's place about twenty miles from here."

The car swerved suddenly.

"Oh!" cried Hermione. "Why is he going there?"

"Presumably for salmon fishing." But she shook her head.

"I don't believe that. Somehow, I had a sort of odd feeling that he would follow me in spite of what he said, and—do you know, Frank, that I am rather afraid of him?"

"Afraid? Nonsense. Why afraid?"

"I can't explain. It's all mixed up with Dominic and his—Bessington's—connection with it. And—and—Oh, sometimes I feel that something dreadful is going to happen, and that Dick Bessington will have something to do with it. Don't laugh at me, Frank."

But he was very far from laughing, for that, in very much the same words, was what he feared himself, though he would have died sooner than tell her so.

CHAPTER VII

A TALK WITH INSPECTOR MACKAY

JOHN CROSBY, the proud owner of the Glen, had just been seeing two of his fishermen guests off in the car that was to take them to the river for a day's salmon fishing, and as it was a very fine day with an exhilarating breeze blowing straight from the sea, John Crosby, who was affected by the weather, was feeling in fine fettle and very pleased with himself and life generally. And on the occasion when he felt like that he generally took a stroll round the extensive grounds-gardens and glasshouses, which latter, had they been extended in a single line, would have covered nearly a quarter of a mile in length. And while he thus strolled he congratulated himself on the possession of all these things, and the fact that it was solely owing to his own and his brother Alec's hard work that had made it possible for him to possess them.

It was extremely gratifying to feel, as he looked around him, that whereas the old aristocracy had merely inherited their possessions, he and his brother had actually worked for them. True, the War had materially helped to increase the profits in double-quick time, and so shortened the years of toil and enable them to retire with immense wealth at a

comparatively early age. But then, so much the better; so much more could he and old Alec appreciate and enjoy the good things of life.

Their money also had made for them many friends —or rather acquaintances—among a class which, once exclusive, was now only too glad to take the goods the gods gave, even if they *were* handed out by retired traders (or, as they preferred to term them, profiteers) of the stamp of Crosby Bros. And, knowing that such a class liked to catch salmon, shoot grouse, and stalk deer—free of expense if possible—the elder Crosby had chosen for his home the sort of place in the kind of country that would supply all these things in abundance, full measure and running over. And he was lucky in that he found after purchase—that the supply did indeed equal the demand. For he had the best fishing, the finest grouse moor and the largest and best-stocked deer forest in that part of the country and, in consequence, his house was usually filled with the best people, his happiness being finally crowned on the day when two titled heads walked through the massive portals of his dwelling-house.

On this occasion, however, titles were lacking, but, nevertheless, his party consisted of some of the best blood in the land, among whom his brother, Alec, was the only jarring note. But even that note ceased to jar when it became apparent that Colonel Bessington—the ultra-smart man-about-town—had, or seemingly had, taken a fancy to him.

As far as John Crosby was concerned, Alec was welcome to the colonel's attentions—if they could be termed such. He was glad of Bessington's presence

there, because it gave to his party a certain cachet—in his own words, "classy tone"—but he did not like the man himself, and was even accused by his wife of showing his dislike.

"Sorry, my dear, don't mean to, but I can't help it I s'pose," he replied. "When I likes a chap I shows it, always did and always shall, and when I don't like him I don't want him near me. Only we've got to have him, 'cos it'll give a blinkin, tone to the show, and I do my best to bottle up my feelings. There's something about him . . ."

"Fiddlesticks!" snapped his wife, sharply. "His manners are perfect and his style—well there! if you had his style there'd be nothing to complain of. But that's just it, it's born and bred in him, and you'll never be like that not if you live to be a hundred. What's your grouse about him!" she went on, rather exasperated at her husband's silence, which was unusual: "It can't be his looks because he's said to be one of the best-looking cha—men in London. And he is, too. There's something really clas—distinguished about him. His figure, for instance—"

"Tailor's dummy," cut in her husband.

"Not at all, John. It's just perfect. As for his face, why he's right down handsome—"

"Wouldn't have to make much if he ever played Old Nick," said John Crosby with a dry chuckle.

"What do you mean?" demanded his lady, tartly.

"What I say, my dear. Not that Old Nick ain't considered a very smart-looking chap, so there's no offence meant. But it isn't his looks, which are well enough in their way. It's that he don't talk enough,

not what you might call entertaining. No smart repartee as you might say, no funny stories—"

"And all the better for that. I'm sure some of the stories you gave me that Lord Harlington told at dinner last year were enough to give you a permanent wave without the expense."

"Ah, he's a sport if you like," said her husband, with a chuckle. "The sort of chap that does one credit to 'ave in the 'ouse—"

"H-ave in the h-ouse, John, *please,*" remarked his wife, emphasizing the aspirates in determined fashion.

"Yes, of course, my mistake. But you get my meaning all the same, don't you, my dear?"

"I must say I prefer the colonel. He's much more of the real aristocrat to my mind, in spite of the other's title. And I like his silent manner. It's very —very—Well, it's like the nice men in Miss what's-her-name's books, you know. There seems to be something behind it all."

"Ah! you're right there, and that's just what I object to," said John Crosby, who, with all his faults, had had the reputation of being open and honest in his dealings with those around him. "There *is* something behind it. Something—now what's the word I want? Something to do with a coat-of-arms when you're born the wrong side of the blanket."

"John, don't be vulgar. You mean sinister—the bar sinister. But I'm sure *he's* all right in that line. There are no vulgar stories connected with the Bessingtons, I'm sure."

"I'm not alluding to what his father may have done, Jenny. It's about himself I'm speaking. Sinister's

the word I wanted, and it ain't connected with bars or blankets. It's just himself that's wrong, somehow, and yet I can't lay my finger on anything particular that *is* wrong. It's just my feelings, same as I used to have when engaging a clerk for the office. I'd size him up quick-like. Something about him what didn't seem straight, and yet he appeared right enough. And *I* was right, too, for when I engaged young Joe Blake—you remember him?—against that feeling which told me *not* to engage him, what happened? Why, the accounts were wangled, of course, and he got away with——"

"Never mind all that now, John," snapped his wife. "That part of our lives is over and done with, thank God. We are gentry now, and must behave as such. There, go away and see Mr. Myles Transon and Captain Leslie off in the Rolls, and see that Bennings has put in all they want—the champagne and all the rest of it. And remember that that police person, Mackay, from Locharbie, was coming to see you about that young gardener you were asking about, and that he'll be here at eleven o'clock. So you had better go and meet him, as we don't want policemen seen about the house, it gives a bad tone to a place." And with that she left her husband to fulfill the duties she had mentioned, and went off to undertake her own.

So John Crosby saw his two guests off and then went for a stroll round his domain. Interviewed the head gardener, a dour individual, who, if he lacked for polish, was second-to-none at his own particular job. Returned to the house, looked with possessive admiration at the nobly-turreted structure, and nearly

cannoned into Richard Bessington as he came round the corner on to the drive.

"Beg pardon, I'm sure. My fault. Wasn't looking where I was going," said John Crosby, apologetically.

Bessington showed an upper row of gleaming teeth in a smile. "Don't mention it," he said. "I was going to ask you if I might put in a bit of revolver practise at your targets."

"A'course, if you want to. But I thought you were such a dab hand with the little automatic that it wasn't necessary."

"One gets rusty and out of practise in this country," was the reply.

"You should join a gang of up-to-date crooks, Colonel," sad Crosby with a laugh. "That'd keep you busy. Or a Wild West show."

"Hardly in my line, either of them, I'm afraid," was the reply, and there was a hint of annoyance in the tone.

"No, no, 'course not. Only my joke. Go and practise all you want, Colonel. I'm just off down the drive to meet Inspector Mackay from Locharbie. Don't want the police going up to the house, you know. So I thought I'd kill two birds and have a walk as well."

"Not any trouble, is there?" inquired the other, mildly interested.

"No, no. Nothing of that sort. I wanted another gardener, and heard that a chap I was after wasn't quite the right sort, so I asked Mackay to find out if there was anything against him and he's coming over to-day to see me. Care to come for a walk, or p'raps you'd rather go to the targets."

"No, that will do later. I'll certainly come. I have met Mackay before, you know."

So the ill-assorted pair set off together, the one—good-looking, lean, clad in light tweeds of perfect cut, the shapely legs seen to advantage in woollen stockings to match. The other—under medium size, stout, ungainly, in homespun whose check was just too loud, and the plus fours just too baggy, but the ugly face was retrieved from real ugliness by the kindly expression in the eyes, which was sadly lacking in those of his companion.

He did not particularly want Richard Bessington's company, but it did occur to him that perhaps the inspector's manner—which had struck him as lacking in respect—might improve at sight of such a distinguished-looking guest as was Colonel Bessington.

The two had not gone many yards along the high road—after passing through the lodge gates—when the blue-clad figure of Inspector Mackay was seen approaching on his motor-bicycle.

" 'Morning, Mackay," said Crosby, as the officer dismounted and saluted.

" 'Morning, sir." He left his machine near the stone wall which bordered the road and came towards the two, his sharp eyes fastened upon the good-looking guest.

"You have met before, I think, Mackay," said Crosby. "Colonel Bessington you know, who is staying with me," he proceeded, unctuously.

"Aye, to be sure! Good morning, sir," said Mackay, with appraising eyes still on the handsome figure. "It's a fine day for the fishing, sir."

"Splendid," agreed Bessington.

"Well, have you found out about young Finlay?" asked Crosby abruptly. "Anything wrong or not?"

"Naething whatever, sir. You can safely engage the lad. The pairrson who gave you the information was mistaken. It's Finlay's brother who is the good-for-nothing, Jock Finlay, not Robert."

"Ah, I'm glad of that. It's not often I'm at fault in the judgement of a man's character by his looks. I'll take him, then."

"I'd have him mysel', sir, if I could get him," said Mackay, "but I can't."

"A sufficient recommendation, I should imagine," observed Bessington, showing his teeth once more in a smile.

"Juist so, Colonel."

"I suppose it must be pretty dull for you fellows up here," went on Bessington, taking a cigarette-case from his pocket and selecting one from it. "I mean, nothing much doing in the shape of crime and so on?"

"Ach! We're no' sae badly off for crime, sir," replied Mackay, seemingly with pride in the statement. "You'd be surprised if I were to tell you half the goings-on in Locharbie."

"Indeed? You amaze me. Such an out-of-the-way unsophisticated part as this. Extraordinary!" Bessington lit his cigarette.

"You're wrong there" put in Crosby with a grin. "The more innocent-looking the hamlet the greater the immorality. Ain't that so Mackay?"

"Ah, to be sure you're richt, Mr. Crosby," agreed the inspector. "Though juist the noo I may say that

we were looking for a job, so to speak, and might still be looking so far as Locharbie is concerned, if it hadna' been for the smugglers."

"Smugglers? What, up here?" asked Bessington in astonishment.

"Here or anywhere where there's a convenient landing," replied Mackay, darkly, "and where better than the auld tower over yonder?" he waved a vague hand northwards.

"Put me wise, Inspector," drawled Bessington. "This sounds devilish intriguing."

"Smugglers, you say, Well, I'm damned," commented bluff John Crosby. "Where from? And what goods are they landing, Inspector? Brandy, eh?"

"Ah, if I knew that, sir, I wouldna' have to be tellin' you aboot them. I've had a man on watch in the tower for ower a week now."

"What tower's that?" asked Bessington, slowly.

"Why, the auld Ardenmore Tower, sir, that stands out on the sea coast, half a mile from Ardenmore House."

A sudden glint came to Bessington's eyes. "Ah," he said. "Yes, I think I've heard of it. The place was bought lately by—by—let's see, what was the name?"

"You mean the rich widdy, Rodenberg?" put in Crosby. "Friend of yours, ain't she?"

"Yes, of course, for the moment I forgot it was she who had bought it." Bessington puffed at his cigarette and glanced at the inspector. "Tell me about these smugglers," he went on. "You say they are landing the goods at the tower there?"

"Well, look here," interrupted Crosby, glancing at his watch, "if you'll excuse me, Colonel, I'll just go

on to Finlay's cottage, about a mile down the road. If you're interested in this stunt, I'm not, and so I'll leave you and Mackay to get on with it."

"Quite," agreed Bessington. "Don't bother about me." He watched the stout ungainly figure set off along the road, and then turned once more to Mackay. "I'm interested in—er—crime," he drawled, "and this smuggling business sounds intriguing."

"It would be if I could lay my hands on them, sir," was the reply. "A queer business and no mistake. We got word that lights were seen signalling out to sea, and that a motor-car was hearrd on the Ardenmore road late a' nights, and you see, sir, that road ends for all practical purrposes at the house itsel', and the wee bit lane that goes on, goes only to a field. So I spent a day and night at the tower mesel'."

"And did you find anything?"

"Naething ata' except—no, sir, naething of any imporrtance."

"You did find something, then?" insisted the other, quick to hear the hesitation in the man's words.

"Weel, I'll no' be saying that I found naething ata', and there can be no harrm in telling it to you, sir," said the garrulous inspector, "for mebbe you might be able to throw some light on it. I showed it to the leddie at Ardenmore House, and though she couldn' gie me an idea as to how it came there she seemed—" he hesitated, as though for a word.

"Yes. She seemed—upset?" suggested Bessington.

"Aye, that's it, sir, upset. But hear for yoursel'. What I found was a wee bit paper, maybe torn from a note-book, and on it was written in block letters the

date—Monday, December the 3rd, 1917," and as he spoke, Inspector Mackay eyed the good-looking face keenly.

"Ah?" said Bessington, at last. "A date." There was not a tremor in his voice, nor a hint of excitement on his face, and yet, as he listened to Mackay's words, his heart had missed a beat, and his quick, alert mind had jumped, as Hermione's had done, to the one meaning, the one possibility. "Why a date, Inspector? And where, exactly, did you find it?"

"I found it lying on the shingle betwixt the water's edge and the tower, sir. I concluded that the pairrson who had landed, in order to signal from the tower, had dropped the wee bit paper by mistake—"

"Or possibly with intent," suggested Bessington, quietly.

"Ah. Mebbe, as you say, with intent." The idea seemed to strike Mackay as possible. "As a signal, warning, in code?" he suggested.

"Quite so, or—well, it might mean a hundred things. Or again, it may have no significance at all, Inspector, and nothing whatever to do with the smuggling."

"That's so, sir," Mackay replied, slowly.

"Mrs. Rodenberg was—ah—excited about it, you say," asked Bessington, casually.

"Weel, I couldna' say that she showed a vera great deal of excitement, sir. She looked harrd at it, and seemed to be thinking a good deal."

"Yes, I see. Well, as a matter of fact, I don't see how this date can have anything to do with a smuggling gang operating nine years later. Though, as

you say, it may be a code signal. What exactly are you doing about it?"

"Juist naething but watch, for the present," was the reply.

"Well, you might do worse than that." Bessington waved a hand as though dismissing the subject. "Tell me, Inspector, have you lived long in this neighbourhood?"

"Bred and borrn in Locharbie, sir, though I've no' spent the whole of my life in these pairrts."

"I see. But you were possibly acquainted with—or at least, you knew of the Ardenmores?"

"Verra weel, sir. Though I canna' say that I saw muckle of them, as I was awa' from Locharbie as a constable and only came there as inspector within the last five years. But when I was a boy I used to hear tell of the Ardenmores of Ardenmore, and when I was hame on leave I saw the young laird several times."

"Ah, to be sure. Sad thing about his death," observed Bessington.

"Verra sad, sir. Broke the auld folks' hearts. Kilt he was, three months after he went out there. I was mesel' in Gallipoli at the time, but hairrd aboot it when I came hame."

"You don't know, then, the actual date of his death?" asked the other, regarding his companion through half-closed lids.

"Nay, sir. Some time in '17. November or December or thereaboots."

"Yes, so I believe. Well, if you hear any more of these smuggling fellows, let me know, Inspector.

I am very interested in the matter, and, by the way, I hope you warned Mrs. Rodenberg to be careful. That old tower you speak of seems unpleasantly close."

"To be sure I warned her, and asked her to let me know if she saw onything suspeecious."

"Ah, and she will, I suppose?"

"And why should she not, sir?" replied Mackay, with a quick glance at the other.

"Why not, of course. Though, as a matter of fact, I doubt if there is really anything in it after all."

"That remains to be seen, sir."

"Quite," agreed Bessington.

"Then I'll be getting back, sir, and if I hear tell of anything I'll let you know, sir." He crossed over to his machine.

"Do," said Bessington. In deep thought he retraced his steps to the Glen, and once in his own luxurious room, he stood at the window, staring out towards where, twenty miles away, he knew the sea to lie. And his mind went back to that tiny bit of paper lying on the shingle.

"It was not I who dropped it," he thought, as he drummed with his fingers on the window-sill, "and Daneham's in London—or rather was at the time and could not have dropped it. Hermione also could not have done so. There is only one other who knew the date, and he was fond of that old place—he knew every inch of the ground—and now it's being used as a smuggling base—!"

A slow smile parted his lips, revealing once more the gleaming row of teeth.

Then he unlocked a dressing-case, took from it a

small automatic, fully loaded, stuffed some cartridges into his pocket, and, going downstairs, made his way to the field in which were a row of targets.

He had twelve cartridges altogether, and by the time he had emptied the automatic and his pocket—standing for the two final shots at a longer range than was usual for revolver practise—he had twelve bull's-eyes to his credit.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MESSAGE IN THE PAPERS

An uneventful ten days passed slowly by and found Hermione and her two friends as far off knowing the truth of matters—either regarding the smugglers or their connection with the tower—as they were before. The watching police officer had made his headquarters in the tower room, and, being a dour, sour-tempered man, had refused admittance to anyone save the relief, who came every three days to add to his store of food, and take his place for a spell of twenty-four hours' leave. He expressed his conviction that to stay there at all was a waste of time that the tale of smuggling was bunkum, and that if there was any going on at all it would be farther south, and not so far from the French coast, which supposition appeared to be justified, for soon after a gang was caught in the act a hundred and fifty miles south, and hauled off to summary justice.

Exasperated, at length, at being kept out of the very spot where Hermione and her friend wanted to investigate, Frank Daneham motored over to Locharbie and interviewed the inspector.

"Look here," he said, after first of all explaining how he came to be there and to know all the facts up to date. "I think it only fair to you to tell you that you are doing no good by keeping that man on the watch as you are doing. I am firmly convinced that secret information is forthcoming from some individual on the premises, and that as soon as the coast is

clear, and not until—or very soon after your friends, the smugglers, will appear again, and if so, we who are on the spot and unsuspected by them, can send you word and you will have a chance to catch them."

The inspector eyed his visitor for a moment in silence, seeming to ponder over what he had heard.

"Ah, so that's what you are thinking, sir, are you?" he said, at last. "Weel, I'm nae sae sure but what you may be richt. I've thought so mesel'. But I suppose you'll be having no idea as to who will be giving the inforrmation?"

"How can I? I don't even know if it is a fact. It is only theory after all, but I thought it worth while trying out and seeing what comes of it. At any rate, it can do no harm, and surely anything is better than letting that fellow eat his head off in that god-forsaken tower. And so I thought the best thing I could do was to come over and see you about it."

"And I'm verra gratefu' to you, sir. But, as a matter of fact, Headquarters have juist sent worrd to recall him, as they think the gang that has been caught furrther south is the one that has been here, and there'll be no need to watch any mair. All the same, I'm glad you came, for you may be richt in your supposeetion. There is still that queer piece of paper I found on the beach that has to be accounted for, and I canna' help thinking that something's going to occur connected with it. The young leddie seemed sair taken abeck when she read it."

"Well, as a matter of fact," said Daneham, thinking that the truth was best in this case, "the date on that bit of paper had a very sad significance for her, and the coincidence of finding it like that gave her a nasty shock."

"Ah, I see," replied the inspector, who saw just exactly nothing, but who thought there might be quite a lot to see if he knew just where to look. He was, however, quite willing to give—so he expressed it to himself—this gentleman and the young leddie their heads for a time, and leave the place unwatched. If anything happened after that he would know who to watch in future. At present his policy was to appear open and confiding and ready to talk.

"I was ower at the Glen, Mr. Crosby's place," he went on, "a day or so ago, on a matter of beesiness, and the gentleman there was verra interested in the matter of the smuggling. One gentleman in parteecular, Colonel Bessington, whom I had met before seemed to be muckle keen on hearing all I had to tell."

"Oh!" Daneham gave an imperceptible start. "And—er—did you—I mean—what exactly did you —that is, I suppose—you told him all about your own experiences?"

"I did, sir, juist the whole beesiness, and I told him aboot the scrap of paper."

"Did you?" said Daneham, and swore under his breath. What a damned gossiping fellow this fool policeman was. There could be no possible doubt as to the construction Bessington would put upon that date. Connected, too, as it was, with Ardenmore, it would not be difficult for one, already suspicious, to suspect what he, Frank Daneham, and Hermione were beginning to believe was a fact. . . . Why on earth couldn't the inspector fellow have kept his mouth shut about it? It was not as though he could learn anything from that quarter. Though what, after all, he argued later, could Bessington do about it? And what, finally, was there to bother about, seeing that

the whole idea was utterly preposterous and impossible?

He returned to Ardenmore to find Iza Marsh in violent argument with the new head gardener, concerning the matter of trees and Hermione's orders.

"Well, anyhow, whether things will grow or won't grow, Mrs. Rodenberg won't have them cut down, so that's that. And there you are back again, Frank. If you want Hermione you'll find her at the tower, where she went as soon as we heard that the police person with the crab-apple face and vinegar temper had taken himself off. It was a bit of impertinence to have put him there at all in my opinion."

"I'll go and find her then," said Daneham, and after taking the car round to the garage, he set off along the path which led to the tower, and in less than fifteen minutes was striding up the grassy patch to the tower door.

It stood wide open, and inside the room he found Hermione sitting on the chair, apparently in deep thought. She rose quickly as he came in and asked eager questions, to which her friend gave guarded replies; at least, in the matter of the part Bessington had played in the affair, and seemed in all probability to go on playing. He avoided telling her that the inspector had mentioned that scrap of paper.

"So our troubles are over for the moment, and now we can concentrate on investigating this place, and trying to find out where the deuce those beggars hid themselves."

"I simply can't imagine," replied Hermione, with a hopeless gesture. "I have looked everywhere. Under this floor there is a tiny space with joists and then

solid rock, for I took up a loose board where I suppose the inspector had looked when he was here. The walls can hide nothing, for they are only fifteen inches thick, except at the side where the clock is, and there comes solid rock again, for that side of the tower is actually built into the rock. I really have come to the conclusion that the hiding-place is not in the tower at all. It must be in the woods."

"How about the clock itself?" asked the other, eyeing it critically. "Didn't poor old Dominic tell you that there was a secret attached to it?"

"Yes, he did. But what can it be? It doesn't go—at least, now. You can move all the hands round and nothing happens. Look." She opened the glass front and pointed. "There are numbers all round up to a hundred, and four hands which fold over each other, for some reason or other; economy of space I suppose. Then comes that dial with the names of the months, and another with numbers up to thirty-one. In that smaller dial there are the days, then a sort of barometer, and a disc for the moon, and yet nothing is in working order."

"But it must have worked at one time," replied Daneham, "and perhaps that was the secret Dominic discovered—how to get it going. In fact, that is what it must have been, and it wouldn't help us even if we succeeded in finding out. No, my dear, I believe you are right and that there is some secret place close by in the woods. So, let's take a walk and do a bit of investigating. You have done all you can here. Can we get across the river that runs through the wood, do you know, or not?"

"I doubt it, for there has been quite a lot of rain

lately. But in any case I am sure there is nothing on the other side, for the road runs parallel with it for some way, and no one would choose a hiding-place near a road, and that, too, ends—as I have discovered, in a field. Perhaps there is something in that, for why make a road which ends nowhere, and if it went on would end in the sea?"

"Perhaps it originally went to this old tower," suggested Daneham, and she nodded.

"Yes, I never thought of that. Of course, it must have done."

They closed the tower door and started off for the pine forest, on a path which in places was rocky and very hard going. They found the old road nearly grass-grown, and beside it the broad River Ard, which eventually emptied itself into the sea, not far from the tower. Then they followed its course which wound through the woods, finally disappearing beneath a mass of rocks, through which was a natural tunnel, about the height of a medium-sized man, and, gurgling apparently underground for about thirty or forty yards, appeared again on the far side of the rocks, descended in a short cascade, and thence to the sea.

"Nothing doin' here," commented Frank Daneham, in a disappointed voice. "Let's go back along the road and see what happens. The smuggling crowd are supposed to use the road to convey their goods by car, and I don't see how they can do it. Personally, I am beginning to doubt the whole thing."

"You wouldn't say so if you had seen those lights."

"Someone playing tricks to try and frighten you," he suggested.

"What about the motor-boat I heard?"

"Well, still someone fooling about. Having got hold of the smuggling story, anyone owning a boat of that description would find it easy."

"You may be right, of course," she admitted.

They continued their walk along the winding road, which finally left the river to pursue its course alone, and, turning off sharply, joined the Ardenmore road at about a quarter of a mile from the entrance gates to the house.

"I suggest tea, my dear, and your Irish cook's hot scones. I believe it's a myth, after all."

"Well, we shall see. If, as you say, someone is supplying them with information from here, then we shall soon see the light from that tower again. But then how—if the smugglers are in France—could anyone give information to them?"

"An advertisement in the papers would meet the occasion," replied Daneham. "And that, as a matter of fact, though I sez it meself, is the brightest idea we've had yet. We'll proceed forthwith to watch the agony columns."

And as it happened, on the following day there were several advertisements that might fit the case, but one in particular which attracted Iza Marsh, who was as keen on the subject as the other two.

"Listen to this one," she said eagerly. "It sounds rather the style of thing one might expect—'All clear. Come again.' "

"Sounds likely," admitted Daneham, sipping his after-luncheon coffee and frowning. "But who the deuce can it be?"

"Well, it can't be the new gardeners," said Hermione. "And it can't be any of the servants. It could only be some of the farm-hands, and somehow—from the look of them—they don't appear to have the sense or the ability to do it. I can't imagine that it is anyone here. And then, after all, that advertisement may not be for that reason at all."

But whether in answer to that particular advertisement or not, the fact was that, three nights later, Hermione, lying reading in bed, and happening to take her eyes from the pages for a second, had, the next instant, flung the book down beside her, extinguished the reading-lamp and, looking towards the open uncurtained window, become aware of a sudden tingling sensation in her scalp as, away through the opening in the pine wood, and clear as she had seen it once before, there shone high above, and seemingly suspended in the sky, a vivid green light, which, even as she watched, flickered and went out, leaving her wondering if she had ever really seen it at all.

The next instant, also as once before, she had flung on her things and run down the passage, only this time towards the room in which Frank Daneham slept.

She rapped loudly at the door.

"Frank! May I come in?" There was no answer. She called and knocked again, but still no reply. Then, with a feeling of intense uneasiness, she opened the door and crossed over to the bed. It was empty, and had not been slept in. And yet he had gone up to his room over two hours ago, for at that moment she heard the clock in the hall strike two.

CHAPTER IX

AN ENGAGING YOUNG CRIMINAL

FRANK DANEHAM, feeling particularly wide-awake, entered his bedroom as the clock chimed a quarter to twelve, and, crossing over to the window, flung it open. He was a believer in fresh air. The man James who waited on him, evidently was not. And as he leant far out and felt the cold night air blow on his face, the idea occurred to him that a quick walk of half an hour's duration might induce the sleep—that at present was very far away—to visit him. He had experienced sleepless nights before, and he did not want to renew that experience again. So, going softly downstairs—for he did not want to disturb the two ladies—he flung on a coat, pulled a tweed cap well down over his head, and let himself out of the door, first of all making sure that the latchkey with which Hermione had presented him reposed in his pocket.

Once outside he took a deep breath of the invigorating air, and was on the point of turning down the avenue, when something caught his eye. He was then standing directly opposite to the break in the trees, which Hermione could see from her window, and away in the distance he caught the glimmer of a tiny red light high up in the sky. It was there for a second and then had disappeared.

A red light! Just what Hermione had seen, and three days ago that advertisement had appeared in the paper.

The conjunction of occurrences was too obvious to be ignored.

He set off at a run down the path, which by now had been cleared and was, moreover, quite familiar to him, Hermione had walked on the night that she had seen the light, and had arrived in time to hear the motor-boat going away. Perhaps by running and with luck he might get there to see it come in. He ran, therefore, as he had not run for years, and before he reached the grassy slope which led to the tower, he had to pause in order to get his breath. There was no light now and no sound, not even the chug-chug of the boat. Perhaps, after all, he also was too late.

He strode up the grassy slope, rounded the tower, and found the door shut as Hermione had done. But he had no electric torch and had to feel, so that it was a minute before he could locate the handle, and then he turned it quickly, pushed the door open and waited.

It was dark inside and there was not a sound. Empty, of course.

He took two steps through the door and the next instant found himself seized by both arms, while a rough hand clutched his throat in a strangling grip.

Completely taken by surprise, though he struggled desperately, he was helpless and could do nothing. His two assailants—for he recognized that there were two of them—had not spoken a word, and presently a sharp kick under the knee from a heavy boot sent

his legs from under him and he was sprawling face downwards on the ground and firmly held by strong hands.

A mellow voice, educated, refined, and speaking in French, broke the uncanny silence, and a bright white light was flashed on from an electric torch.

"Gently, you miserable son of a sacred pig! You are not dealing with the condemned police. Can't you see, imbecile that you are! that he is a gentleman of the old noblesse? Otherwise, sacred name of a dog! would he have been such a complete fool as to have come alone and unarmed?"

This was so humiliatingly true that Daneham, amidst his futile struggles, found occasion to wince.

A gruff, uneducated voice replied in the same language.

"How was I to know in the dark, Master? Is it then possible to feel by a man's clothes if he be a gentleman or a damned Customs officer?"

"It is if you use your intelligence—always provided that you have it, *bien entendu*," was the cutting reply. "You have some rope in your pockets I believe, even though you have no sense in your head. Therefore give it me. And you, monsieur—" a gentle tap on Daneham's head indicated that the next remarks were addressed to him: "Keep still, if you please, otherwise I shall be under the unhappy necessity of hurting you, for which I have no desire. *Voyons,* Marcel, place your fat carcass on his legs while I make fast his arms."

Frank Daneham, realizing at last his complete helplessness, took the advice offered him and lay still. He then felt his arms being drawn back, his wrists

crossed, and a stout cord wound and knotted tightly round them. The same ceremony was then performed on his ankles.

"A thousand pardons, monsieur," said the amiable voice again. "I am desolated to inflict this treatment upon you, but in my calling necessity knows no law. You speak French, monsieur?" At these words the light was switched off and Daneham felt strong arms raise him and place him in a sitting position against the wall. Then once more the light was renewed, but as it was directed straight into his face, he could see nothing whatever of his assailants, and could only blink, and, in his angry impotence, give vent to a fine exhibition of honest English swearing, directed at his unseen captors, and which, if it did nothing else, at least relieved his feelings for the moment.

"Ah bon!" There came an infectious laugh. "Monsieur has taken no harm. He can at least speak good English, whatever he may accomplish with the French. *Enfin,* I speak it, too. For when one is in a foreign country it is, for example, only good manners and polite to speak the language. And *toujours la politesse*, is it not so, monsieur?"

The voice—that of a young man—was pleasant. He spoke English, too, with hardly an accent. There was a quality also in the voice which appealed to Daneham in spite of his humiliating position. Appealed to his good nature and therefore completely disarmed him, took the anger from him and left him morally as defenceless as he was physically so.

"I'd like to know who the devil you are, how you came here, and what the blazes you are doing," he exclaimed, and at that the other laughed again.

"No doubt you would, monsieur, and you are not the only one in your charming country—charming, I assure you, in spite of its most damnable climate —who would like to know as well. But one cannot please everyone. *Helas!* that it should be so. I who would be friends with all the world, I who would even love the Customs officers—if they would let me, it is understood. But no. There are, unfortunately, certain things between us that keep us from mutual affection. Charming things, too, monsieur. Silk stockings for your most exquisite ladies' sylph-like legs, pearl necklaces for their swan-like necks—many other things. *Enfin,* it is if you prefer it, the very devil between us, monsieur."

"Well, anyway," said Daneham, shifting uneasily in his bonds, "as on your own showing you want to be so friendly and pleasant to everyone, and as you appear to be two to my one, supposing you start the good work by cutting me loose, Monsieur Whoever-You-Are."

"*Helas!* My friend, I am desolated, but I fear that I cannot do this. You are not too uncomfortable so, are you? I did not tie monsieur so as to hurt him, and, after all, it is not for long, for we must be away soon, and your friends can come then and find you. Monsieur is alone, I presume?"

"That's for you to find out," was the reply.

"*Bien.* I think I need not trouble too much about that. Marcel!" He spoke sharply in French. "Go get the brandy for monsieur. He is thirsty, and I am thirsty, and we have work to do, you and I. Go quick, my friend. I will wait for your return."

Daneham heard the sound of the man's retreating footsteps and presently the crunch of shingle far below.

"So you admit that you are smuggling here?" he demanded.

"Admit!" echoed the other. "But why not, monsieur, since it is obvious that I do not come here for the fishing or the shooting or even to paint the scenery! Look, I will even show you, and thereby proclaim my good will and trust in you."

As he spoke he flashed the light across the room, and Daneham saw to his amazement that it was crammed with bales of tightly-packed silken goods —stockings, underwear, thousands of things, and all easily transportable by car. There were also boxes which the Frenchman affirmed, with a note of pride in his voice, contained the works for watches, and pearl necklaces. "Imitation, it is understood, and all for sale in your country, monsieur, and from which I make a profit that is more than satisfying. I have, indeed, carried on the good work for over a year. But now that your police—for whom I have a profound admiration and respect—have awakened from their chrysalis state of somnolence and arrived at the knowledge of my activities here, *Mort Dieu*! I finish —I go—I evaporate. Also the big house being occupied is not to my taste, though, if the lady who owns it is willing, I would gladly purchase from her this tower which has an interest for me, and for which I would be willing to give a fair price. You would perhaps, monsieur, suggest it to her when next you have the felicity of seeing her? Is it not so?"

Daneham laughed outright at this. The sheer impudence of it was too much for his composure.

"Well, I'm damned," he said. "For cool cheek you'd take a lot of beating, young man. Who, by the way, put you wise about the tower in the first instance?" Here at last he might get the answer to that one great puzzle.

"Ah, for that, it was a friend who told me some time ago, and I profit by the knowledge," was the reply.

"The same friend, perhaps, who wrote that date on the bit of paper that was found and which you dropped over a week ago on the shingle near this tower?" suggested Daneham, taking a shot at a venture.

The flash-lamp jerked, almost imperceptibly.

"Ah! You found that, did you? My faith, it was grossly careless of me to have dropped anything," admitted the engaging young criminal. If only Daneham could have seen his face—"But it is of no consequence. It was that I have a bad memory. Oh, a memory of the very worst, monsieur, and my friend wrote the words down for me so that I should not forget. That is all. It is nothing, I assure you, a *bagatelle*. But perhaps it is better that you ask no more questions, monsieur. Presently I have to remove these goods by car. A friend will be here with his automobile to help me, and, during that little process monsieur will be sound asleep—I hope."

"I have neither inclination nor intention of going to sleep," was the reply. Strangely enough he had felt no fear all through. He had no thought of danger to himself. His engaging young captor, by his manner and his personality, had dismissed the ele-

ment of fear from the situation. Nor was there, to his mind, a possibility of rescue, either. All at Ardenmore would believe him to be in bed and asleep. No one would possibly guess that instead of being between the comfortable sheets at home, he was lying in the tower room securely bound hand and foot.

"The inclination will come, monsieur, believe me," said the Frenchman. "The intention will be all on my part. And I hear my man returning now."

"Then you won't tell me who told you about this tower?" asked Daneham. "Do you, by chance, know a man called Dominic Arden?" The question was rapped out quickly, but if he had expected to see the light jerk again, he was disappointed, for it remained perfectly steady.

"Non, monsieur, I do not know even to whom you refer," was the reply. "And once more I advise you to ask no further questions. Enough that I tell you this is my last visit to the tower. After that I retire, I operate—as you call it—no longer on this coast. It becomes unhealthy if one returns too often. Marcel! Is that you?"

A gruff voice replied in the affirmative.

"Then haste, my cabbage. One supposes that you have returned to La Belle France for the cognac. For me, I could have journeyed to Paris and back in the time. Come, you have a glass, I hope. Monsieur is not accustomed to drink from a bottle as you are, *mon vieux.*"

"Yes, I have a glass, my Master."

"I don't want any brandy, thanks all the same," said Daneham, shortly.

"It is, I fear, not what you want, monsieur," was the reply, "but what I wish. In this instance I demand that you drink some of this brandy, and if you are wise, monsieur, you will comply with my demand."

"And if I refuse?" began the other.

"In that case, monsieur, you force me to take measures, which we shall, in after years, both of us regret most deeply. For I shall be under the necessity of placing you on your back and pouring the brandy down your throat, monsieur, and I execrate the idea, I assure you. Be advised, therefore. Drink quickly and make no resistance. It is good brandy, and, being an honest man—though your Customs officers dispute this fact—I will tell you that it is also drugged, and will keep you quiet, without doing you any harm, during the time that I propose to remove my goods. For assuredly the good God knows that monsieur must not see how that is done, *bien entendu*. Now, my friend, what is it to be?"

There was nothing for it but compliance, for Daneham had no wish to be man-handled again.

"Very well," he said angrily. "Give me the damned stuff."

"Monsieur is wise, but then, since monsieur is English, I knew that he would be." There came the gurgle of liquid poured into a glass. "Monsieur will pardon me." The engaging young smuggler held the brimming glass towards Daneham. "Monsieur has been amiableness itself. It has been a pleasure to meet him, to show him my goods, and to engage in conversation with him. He will forgive this little

harmless precaution, will he not? We part on friendly terms? *N'est ce pas?"*

"Hang it all, yes," he cried with a sudden laugh. "Devil take you, get on with it, man."

"Monsieur, I thank you. May we meet on a happier occasion. I would drink this toast with you myself, but, *Helas!* I must keep my faculties clear for what I do. *Alors, monsieur,* I wish you a very pleasant repose, and as some compensation for what I inflict on you, I will leave a bale of silk stockings for you to present to the lady of Ardenmore House with my humblest felicitations."

With that he went behind the chair, placed the glass to his captive's lips, and his other hand on his forehead, and as Frank Daneham opened his lips to smile irresistibly at the exquisite effrontery of those last words, he felt his head jerked back and the liquid poured into his mouth, and a second later the glass was empty. Then, while the man Marcel held the light, Daneman felt himself lifted by strong arms and laid gently on his back upon the floor, while beneath his head was placed a small package of something soft and silken.

"Au revoir, monsieur. A bientot." This was the last sound he consciously heard, for a moment later he felt himself sinking into happy oblivion.

CHAPTER X

A TELEGRAM FROM BESSINGTON

For a moment Hermione wondered if she should wake Iza Marsh, the next she decided that perhaps, after all, Frank had returned to the smoking-room—for he always kept dreadfully late hours—and was probably reading there or had fallen asleep. So, tip-toeing downstairs, she hurried along the passage and flashed her lamp into the room, only to find it empty also. She went back to the hall where a quick glance showed her that his hat and coat had gone.

It was impossible that he could have seen the green light from his bedroom window, for it faced south instead of east like hers, and yet it was equally obvious that he had gone out, and there was only one place where he would be likely to go at that hour of the night. So, without pausing to consider the wisdom or otherwise of her action, she let herself out by the front door and once again set out for the half-mile walk to the old tower.

It was easier going now since it had been cleared and the moon showed intermittently between the clouds, so presently she found herself running, urged on by a nameless fear, an odd sensation that her journey would not end as tamely as it had done before, and wondering if, after all, it would have been

wiser to have roused Phillimore and taken him with her. He, of course, had heard all about the smugglers' activities, and had tried at times to get into conversation with the taciturn police officer on guard. Phillimore, she reflected, as well as being an admirable butler was also a very decent man and would have been a tower of strength on such a lonely expedition as the present one. However, she had not sought his aid, and as it was too late to go back now, she had to make the best of it and trust to luck.

She gained the tower at length, took one glance out across the sea, and hearing and seeing nothing suspicious, she pushed open the old door, entered the room and flashed on her lamp. The next instant she had uttered a sharp cry, sprung across the dirty, dusty floor, and was down on her knees beside a prone figure that lay outstretched at the far end.

For one moment as she peered into Frank Daneham's face, she thought he was dead, but tearing open his coat and pressing her hand on his heart, she realized by the steady beat that what in her fright she had taken for death was only heavy sleep. She had even failed to hear—for fear had numbed her faculties—his rather stertorous breathing.

Reassured at last, she called his name, and getting no response, placed a hand on his shoulder and shook him.

That also proving unavailing, she tried to think what she ought to do, for it was obvious now that he had been drugged. Moreover, for the first time she saw something unnatural in his position. He seemed to be lying on his arms and hands, and a glance at his

feet showed her a stout cord tied tightly round his ankles. Fear took hold of her.

Why on earth had she not brought Phillimore, or even Iza Marsh? And what would happen if the brutes who had done this to him should come back and find her? She would be utterly at their mercy.

However, there was not a sound in the place, which seemed to be deserted, and there was no throb from a returning motor-boat. Yet she did not like to leave him there while she ran back for help, and to sit as she was doing, idle, was out of the question.

A slight movement from the prostrate man gave her a sudden hope. Perhaps the drug was working off. She bent quickly over him.

"Frank! Frank! Wake up," she cried, and once more she shook him.

He muttered incoherently, shifted uneasily.

"Frank!" she raised her voice. "It is I, Hermione."

Perhaps it was her name that roused him, for he opened heavy eyes and stared up vacantly into her face.

"Hermione," he muttered, his voice thick and feeble. "When?—How?—" And then he tried to raise himself, but the effort was futile.

Instantly she took him by the shoulders and dragged him into a sitting posture, and under where his head had been for the first time she saw something lying. But she paid no heed to that for he had struggled feebly and she saw that his wrists, as his ankles, were tied with cord.

"My hands—" he muttered, thickly. "And, oh, Lord! my head—"

"Yes, dear, I know, and I want you to try and rouse yourself, and let me get you home. Is there a knife in your pockets?" She fumbled feverishly and found one at last and a moment later his hands were free. Then she set to work upon his ankles and finally put an arm about his shoulder.

"Do you think you could stand, if I helped you?" Fear of the return of those who had done this dastardly thing was again upon her, and to get away was all she asked.

"One—moment—" He tried to put a hand to his throbbing head, but his arms were numb and useless. She saw the effort and at once set to work to restore the circulation.

"You poor dear," she said, tenderly, as she saw the swollen wrists. "What brutes! What infamous brutes."

"N-no," he muttered. "It's—all coming—back. Good fellow—tell you—"

"Never mind that now, Frank," she urged. "You can tell me about it later. All I want is to get you home and to bed. I'm terrified that they'll come back and find us."

This seemed to penetrate to his fuddled understanding. His drugged senses were gradually clearing, and he made a valiant effort, and as she stopped massaging his arms he somehow got to his feet, and stood, swaying helplessly on her supporting arm. Then he glanced round. "They've—gone—" he muttered. "The—con—contraband, I mean."

"Never mind that, dear, let's get into the air," urged Hermione. But he pointed to the thing that had

lain under his head, and seeing it she stooped and picked it up.

"Why, it's a bundle of silk stockings!" she cried, "and beauties, too. How did they come there? But never mind, you can tell me all about it afterwards."

"He—he—left them, for you," said Frank Daneham. And then he lurched out into the air, and she, with the stockings in one hand and her other arm round his body, wondered if she would ever be able to get him home. But she had to try, so she slowly piloted him over the soft grass and down to the pine wood.

"How did—you—" he was beginning, but she stopped him.

"Don't talk," she said. "Keep all your strength for getting back."

And so, in silence, the two of them made their difficult way back to the house. But it was long past three o'clock when Frank Daneham dropped heavily into an arm-chair in his bedroom and clasped his aching head, while Hermione, leaving him at last, ran to the servants' quarters to rouse Phillimore.

When he appeared a few moments later, clad in a dressing-gown, there was deep concern on his honest face.

"I'll get him into bed, ma'am, at once," he said, "and James can go for the doctor in the morning if he's no better, but if it's only a drug and he sleeps it off, he shouldn't take much harm."

By this, Iza Marsh, hearing the voices, was out in the passage, and as Phillimore was attending to Frank Daneham, Hermione poured her story into the elder woman's horrified ears.

"My dear child! How appalling!" she cried. "What on earth does it all mean? And what in the world took Frank up there at such an hour? Do you say *you* saw the green light? Then why in the name of all that's insane didn't you wake me and take me with you?"

"I didn't stop to think. I just had to go and look for him. But I don't even now know what happened. He was far too dazed and fuddled with that vile drug to tell me anything. He said something about the goods having gone, and that this bundle of silk stockings was given to me by someone. At any rate *they* are tangible enough." Iza Marsh took the bundle and looked them over.

"My dear child, I don't think you can have much doubt as to what happened. These are undoubtedly 'the goods', and whoever left this little lot for you, made you a very handsome present. I confess, I shall be glad to know the details."

There came the sound of a softly-closing door and Phillimore came towards them.

"Is he all right?" asked Hermione, anxiously.

"Sound asleep, ma'am. I am just going to get into my things, and then I'll stay with him in case he should wake and want anything."

"That's good of you, Phillimore," said Hermione, gratefully.

"Not at all, ma'am, only my duty. And you need not be at all anxious. I think he will just sleep it off and wake up as sound as ever. I suppose you will want to send a message to the police first thing?"

"No, don't do anything about that. Wait till I

have heard from Mr. Daneham what happened. He will know what is best to be done. I don't want to be bothered by the police until I know what it all means. And, besides, they could do no good in any case, for there was no one there when I found Mr. Daneham. And whatever you do, Phillimore, don't say a word to the other servants."

"I won't, ma'am, as it would only scare them. And if I may presume to advise you, ma'am, as there is nothing more for you to worry about, you should try and get what sleep you can."

"Sound common sense, Phillimore," agreed Mrs. Marsh. "And I'll see that she does it. Come along, my dear, get your things off and hop into bed. Goodness only knows what we may be called upon to do to-morrow—I mean to-day, for it's nearly four o'clock now, mercy be good to us!"

Phillimore proved himself a true prophet, for, five hours later, barring a slight headache, Frank Daneham awoke not very much the worse for his night's adventures, and joined the two women at breakfast downstairs.

The first thing he did was to take Hermione by both hands.

"You plucky little woman," he said, huskily. "Phillimore has been telling me what happened, for honestly I had no recollection of anything until he told me and then it all came back clearly, and I am filled with gratitude and amazement at what you did for me."

"When all the time she deserves a sound whipping for her crass folly in going by herself and not taking Phillimore, or at worst, me with her," struck in Iza Marsh, with, however, a glance at the girl that utterly belied her words.

"Oh, never mind about me! Tell us what happened," cried Hermione. "I am more thankful than I can say that you are all right, Frank. But what on earth made you go there last night, and when did you go? No, drink this coffee first before you speak. It is the very best thing for you, I know."

A moment later he set down his empty cup, and then proceeded to tell them in detail all that had happened, from the moment when he, too, had seen the light, until the administration of the drug by the engaging young smuggler. And to it all the two women listened in enthralled silence.

"A remarkable chap, really," he ended, musingly, "and even now I can't say whether we are on the right track with regard to that bit of paper or not. He dropped it, certainly, owned to it, but when I asked him outright about poor old Dominic, he denied all knowledge of him."

"He may have lied," said Hermione, bitterly; "after all, he treated you abominably and may be capable of anything."

"No, in fairness I can't say that he did that," objected Daneham. "He had to make himself safe, and he might have knocked me out instead of drugging me, there was nothing to prevent him once he had me tied up. But I'll admit that, even in the drugging, he took no chances, for though I had said I would take it—having no other choice, you understand—he made sure that I did take it, for he tilted my head back, confound him! and just as I was smiling at something he had said, poured the stuff into

my mouth, so that I had either to swallow it or choke.

"But, by Jove, he was a pleasant beggar, and spoke good English, too. I would have given anything to have seen his face, but he took devilish good care I shouldn't. And then those stockings, you know. Confounded cheek, wasn't it?"

"Personally, I could do with quite a lot of that kind of cheek," observed Iza, dryly. "And what, by the way, are you going to do with your present, my dear?"

"Well, as Frank was apparently taken with this young man, I suppose really he can't have been as bad as I thought," admitted Hermione with a smile "So I shall keep one pair, to show that I bear no malice, and you can have the rest, darling."

"Well, I'm sure that's very generous of you, child," said the other, "and I'll make a point of wearing 'em whenever I go abroad. It will give me the greatest pleasure to sport them when I go through the Customs, and I'll wear a new pair at every port in the British Isles. That'll teach 'em to put a heavy tax on indispensable clothing, drat 'em. I take off my hat to that young man, I'll tell you that. The only thing that puzzles me is how he got all that contraband, which you saw, out of the place."

"Ah, you may well say that," agreed Daneham. "How indeed? It was on that account, of course, that the young beggar drugged me, so that I shouldn't see his dodge. I have a hazy remembrance of hearing a car, but it is too hazy to be of any use."

"But there was no car there or any signs of one," said Hermione.

"I know. I asked Phillimore if he heard one, and he said he certainly heard what he thought was a car going rapidly along the road to Ardenmore station at about one o'clock. But he certainly did not hear one going in the opposite direction before that. However, we shall know soon, for he is going over to the farm to ask there. They know of all the cars or carts that pass along the road, for, situated on that hill as they are, nothing can escape them."

"They might not have been looking at the time," suggested Iza Marsh.

"Oh yes," replied Hermione. "I was over there only yesterday and saw Mackenzie's old mother who sits in her window all day and never misses a thing. And as her window is open at night and she sleeps very badly, she is bound to have heard one if it passed."

Which surmise indeed proved to be true, for Phillimore announced shortly after that, having gone to the farm himself to make inquiries, he was informed that old Mrs. Mackenzie had heard the car pass at about one o'clock, going towards the station, but that she was certain no car went the other way either before or afterwards. And she wondered where it came from, for she did not think it would be the Ardenmore House car at that time of night.

"Did she say if she had ever heard it before?" asked Daneham eagerly of Hermione.

"Oh yes, frequently. That is what started the gossip about the ghost car coming from nowhere. But, of course, no one really believed her, for, as Mr. Mackenzie pointed out, if it came back it would either

have to go right into the sea in order to disappear, or else it would be found somewhere on the premises, and no one has ever found it."

"That being so it looks as though we shall have to wait some time for its return," said Hermione, "for it is only periodically that the old woman hears it. Therefore there is surely no necessity to tell the police yet."

To this Daneham agreed, and gave instructions accordingly to Phillimore.

When they were once more alone, Hermione turned impulsively to her two friends.

"If that car was heard going away last night," she said, "it means that the Frenchman has taken those things to distribute among his customers. It also means that he will be coming back to hide the car—wherever he does hide it."

"Not if it's true that he has done with smuggling here," objected Daneham. "He would simply take it by sea over to France."

"But do you believe that?"

"Not for a moment. It's too paying a game to drop so lightly. I believe that was merely a blind, to try and induce me to give up watching for him. I don't believe a fellow of his type could voluntarily give up his criminal career and live quietly on the proceeds, whatever the inducement. When he does it will only be when he's caught and lodged in gaol. My own opinion is that we shall probably meet again—as he suggested—under happier conditions for me, anyway. That is if in the meantime he doesn't make the acquaintance of Madame Guillotine."

"Good gracious, Frank," exclaimed Iza. "Is he as bad as that?"

"Who knows? He is, I should say, capable of any extremes. A fellow like that can be as good a friend as he is a bad enemy. Personally, I'd sooner be his friend, for I have an odd sort of feeling that he would go to any length for a pal. However, this is all surmise. What I believe to be fact is that one day he'll be back again, for his hiding-place is so secure that with a confederate to warn him he will feel perfectly safe to carry on. So it's up to us to discover that hiding-place."

"I honestly think it is far more important to find out who is keeping him informed here," said Hermione, and to this Iza Marsh emphatically agreed. It seemed also to all three that unless a miracle happened, the mystery of that date on the scrap of paper would in all likelihood remain a mystery.

An hour later a telegram arrived for Hermione—the advent of which altered the course of events for all of them.

She tore it open and read aloud to her two friends the message written there.

> "May I come over and see you? Staying at the Glen, Locharbie. Dick."

She looked appealingly to Frank.

"Hang the fellow, what does he want?" he growled.

"Better let him come," advised Iza. "There's some reason, or he wouldn't break his compact."

"I agree," said Frank with a frown, as he thought of the bit of paper which had been shown by Mackay to Dick Bessington. "Better to know what he is doing than shut him out and live in ignorance as to his movements."

So the reply was dispatched in two words only:

"Yes, Hermione."

CHAPTER XI

SUSPICIONS

Mr. Alexander Crosby and Colonel Bessington were alone together in the large, comfortably-furnished smoking-room at the Glen. They had just had tea and, hearing that the other guests were pairing off for bridge, and feeling comfortably tired after a day on the river, had retired in good order where they could rest before rejoining the party at dinner.

They were both lounging in arm-chairs, both enjoying a well-earned pipe, and both engaged in reading the papers.

Crosby was—as usual with him—the first to break a long silence.

"I say, Bessington, what's all this clap-trap about smuggling? I see they've bagged some fellows on the east coast down south somewhere. Caught 'em in the act, so to speak. Can that be the same lot who are supposed to be operating up in these parts that John was telling me about?"

The other laid down his paper and stared for a moment into the brightly burning log fire.

"I think not," he replied at last, slowly, and as though weighing his words. "I believe that is another lot altogether. I have been going rather closely into the matter, as it interests me considerably."

"Yes, I saw you hob-nobbing the other day with that inspector fellow. I was crossing over a field with Mrs. Leslie, who likes long walks—deuce take her! —for the sake of what she calls her figure, and I call her blancmange shape, and I spotted you. The police chap seemed to have a deuced lot to say for himself."

"He talked. Oh yes, certainly he talked," admitted Bessington.

"And you listened, eh what? Bet you did, and took it all in, too. Did you glean anything from all the chatter? Or was he just giving a minimum of information in a maximum of wrapping?"

"N-no. What he told me was quite interesting. I saw him again the next day. He said that they were taking off the man they had put on to watch at Ardenmore Tower, as it was considered no longer necessary. Personally, I think it was a mistake. On the other hand, when I sam him yesterday—"

"Oh, so you saw him again yesterday, did you? What for? Same subject, I take it?"

"You may," was the quiet response. "Yes, when I saw him yesterday he told me that a suggestion had been made to him by—er—well, in point of fact, by Frank Daneham to the effect that—"

"Ah! Old Frankie! Staying with the lovely widow I suppose. Wonder if he'll pull it off this time."

"I—er—beg your pardon?" Bessington looked at his companion sharply. "You mean—what exactly?"

"Oh well, he and she are pretty thick, eh what? Always about together in the gay city. All that sort of thing, you know. People will talk, my dear chap. Can't stop 'em."

"They are good friends, I believe, but nothing more," was the cold reply. "More like brother and sister."

The other exploded in a loud guffaw.
"Oh, come off it!" he said. "You don't put that sort of stuff across me, my lad. The brother and sister stunt cuts no ice here."

"Well, I'm afraid it will have to, because one day I hope to make the lady my wife," said Bessington, quietly. And Alexander Crosby, with crimson face, remembered his newly-acquired gentility and apologized profusely.

"Take it as unsaid, Colonel. Never a notion of any such thing. Hope to congratulate you soon, I'm sure."

"Thanks," said Bessington, and a delicate wave of the hand intimated that the subject was closed. "Well, as I was saying, Daneham suggested the advisability of calling off the watch in order to see if the smuggling, which had stopped, would start again, and if it did, it would mean that a friend on the premises was signalling the 'All clear'."

"Ah, to be sure. Bright idea. And do you know if anything happened?"

"I saw an advertisement a few days later in one of the papers with, oddly enough, just those words. 'All clear, come again.' So I saw the inspector and told him about it. He got into touch with the newspaper and found that it was sent from this part of the country, though they had no knowledge of who had sent it. It was paid for in the ordinary way and duly inserted. So I shall be keen to know if anything happens. Though the inspector, I thought, rather laughed at the idea."

"Well, I don't, and that's flat. By Jove! This is rather more interesting than fiction. Why not go over to Ardenmore and investigate? Incidentally, kill two birds with one stone, eh?"

"I'm afraid I don't get you. How do you mean?"

"Oh well! Hang it all, don't make a fellow call a spade a spade like that. Don't the lady live at Ardenmore, eh?"

"Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose that would—from your point of view—be the thing to do. Do you, by the way, know anything of the history of Ardenmore?"

"Well, just a bit, you know. Old people, last of the name, died in '18, year after that son of theirs went West. Lucky for him he did, too. Of course, everyone heard all about that little stunt, at least the story went round. But I doubt if anyone save those in the know knew why he murdered his C.O."

"And incidentally my greatest friend," added Bessington. "Colonel Grimshawe, though few people understood him, was a fine fellow. Queer tempered, I own, and he had other faults—who has not?"

"Granted. I should hate to let anyone into my confession box, if I ever thought fit to tell a few things," agreed the other with a chuckle. "This is news to me, though. I hadn't realized you were in it."

"Not in it exactly. I came in directly after it happened. Or, at least, I was informed that it was directly after." A slow smile widened the thin-lipped mouth, and Alec Crosby, seeing the shining teeth, understood what his brother meant when he referred to Old Nick.

"Was there a doubt of that, then?"

"There may have been in my mind at the time. There may be still. For it seems that there was sufficient time between the blow—or rather the murder—and the summons for help, to enable young Arden to get away. And get away he did. Had he been caught, he would have been shot, of course. Had he lived and returned to this country, he would have been taken and hanged for murder."

"Really? But was it actually murder? I mean, you weren't there to see, only the other fellow, the witness—I don't even know his name."

"I know. But remember it was done in a tumble-down cottage in Flanders, and loud voices carry through thin walls. In the room next to the scene of the crime were two witnesses—both alive to-day—who swore to what they heard. They didn't hear much. They were both, as a matter of fact, sick men, just brought in and waiting to be taken elsewhere, and they both heard young Arden, when accused of having killed someone—for, of course, they didn't know who it was who had been killed—say—'I know, I meant to kill him.' Therefore, had young Arden lived and been taken, their evidence alone, almost, would have hanged him. Whereas we also have the eye-witness to the scene who admitted the crime, and was—so he said—though I have my doubts as to that—himself threatened with a revolver by young Arden."

"But who was the fellow?"

"That, I fear, I am not at liberty to tell you. You see, it is all over and nine years have gone by since it happened. But neither nine nor yet twenty-nine—nor ninety-nine years will lessen my horror of the

deed, nor my grief for the loss of a good friend, nor yet my hatred of the man who did it, and who escaped the death that was his due."

And Crosby, glancing at his companion's face, was aware of a sensation of intense relief that he was a friend of this man and not an enemy.

"But, surely to goodness, you had your revenge, in the fact that the young fellow was killed," he expostulated, for though lacking in blue blood, he had not an ounce of vindictiveness in his nature.

"He died an honourable death on the field, not a felon's death on the gallows," was the reply.

"Well, well, and come, come, death is death when all's said and done, in whatever guise it comes. Hang it all, man, he was young, a mere kid, a baby, and wasn't there some woman? Why! Bless my heart and soul! I'm going dotty on the crumpet. It was a Mrs. Arden the South African married. Young Arden's wife! Goo lor! What a damned mix-up it all is."

"You may well say so," was the grim reply.

"And she bought back the old place when her millionaire hubby died, too. Now that was a bit rummy, wasn't it?"

"No. Sentiment, I suppose. Most nice women are full of it. There is no reason, as far as I can see, why she should not have bought it."

"But Lord bless my heart! Isn't the place a ruin? And she goes and lives in it. What for? Tell me that? I suppose, by the way," he went on, a sudden thought striking him, "there was no doubt about young Arden being killed, was there? I mean, did she believe it? But of course she must have, or she wouldn't have

married old Rodenberg and committed bigamy. Besides, if the young chap was alive, I suppose the lawyer chaps would dispute her right to the money Rodenberg left his wife. Couldn't touch it if she weren't his wife, could she?"

"I don't think anyone would dispute that," replied Bessington. "Rodenberg had no relations. And besides, what do you mean exactly by your suggestion of the doubt as to Arden's death?" Bessington glanced at him sharply as he put the question.

"Oh well, nothing particular, only one has heard some rum things about people's husbands turning up again—generally at the most inconvenient times, by the way—" here he chuckled. "After all, in that almighty hell over there, it would be some job to get a line on to every chap who was killed, and mistakes have been made, you know."

"That's true," admitted the other, "mistakes, as you say, have been made."

No one, as a matter of fact, knew better than he that the evidence of Dominic Arden's death was very far from conclusive, and the information the inspector had given him concerning that mysterious date written on the scrap of paper had reawakened all his former, and nearly half-dead, suspicions, and had made him determined to investigate into the mysterious occurrences at the tower.

Not for a moment did he believe that it was from pure sentiment and devotion to the memory of Dominic Arden that Hermione held out against his entreaties that she should marry him. He thought that in time he could break down the absurd barrier between them.

But, seeing that he had always had a suspicion concerning the actual death of this first husband, he wanted to be quite sure that there would be no returning Enoch Arden to spoil their lives when the consummation so devoutly to be wished had come to pass.

This upstart fellow, Crosby, had been right when he said that husbands had an inconvenient way of turning up. Moreover, there was the coincidence of the name Arden in connection with these same resurrecting husbands, and there was a vein of superstition in Richard Bessington's make-up.

No. If Dominic Arden was alive, then Dominic Arden must be found and dealt with, and Bessington had no doubts as to his own capabilities of dealing with him when once found. Nothing and no one should stand between him and the ultimate goal of his existence—marriage with Hermione Rodenberg.

He even dared to believe that it would be a relief to Hermione to know conclusively that her first husband was dead, for he had wondered many times if her constant refusal of him was based upon that very fear which he, himself, admitted, and which would prevent her from again tying herself to a man who might not, in the end, prove to be her husband at all.

Was it, therefore, possible, that she had bought this place, believing that, if he was alive, it would be the one place in all the world to which he would come back? And was it for love of him that she did this or merely out of a desire to know once and for all? In fact, to make herself secure?

Though he believed most women to be selfish and self-seekers, he could not tell, for Hermione never

allowed the name of her first husband to pass her lips, and would remain frostily silent if he—Bessington—had ever touched upon the subject.

Well, it was on the knees of the gods, and in the meantime he would cultivate this fellow, Alec Crosby, who, though a fool, might be a useful fool, and Bessington had made use of fools before, much to his own advantage.

On the following day he received a message from Inspector Mackay asking him if, when he was in Locharbie again, he would call at his office.

Alec Crosby and his own particular car being always at Bessington's disposal, he was driven in that same day to Locharbie and paid the desired visit.

"You see, sir, it's like this," said Mackay, after he had greeted his visitor and thanked him for coming. "Seeing that you are interested in this affair at the tower, and seeing that I can get no satisfaction from Headquarters, who think there's naething in it, I wondered if you would like to do some investigating yoursel'. We pollis are handicapped, seeing that we are all known by sight, and that civilian clothes would make no matter— Do you follow me, now?"

"I think so. Headquarters think they've got the gang farther south, and that you are after a mares nest, I take it, so they won't send anyone along to help you. Is that it?"

"You have the case in a nutshell, sir," was the reply. "I asked for a mon who was not known in the deestrict to make a few inquiries, for it's no easy matter to make a body speak around these pairts, if that body thinks it's the pollis who are pumping him. If

someone is giving information to these smugglers, it must be done for money, and money talks round here, I'm telling you, and what a body would not tell the pollis he might be willing to tell someone who he knew was not a policeman in civilian clothes."

"I get you, Inspector. You mean, in plain English, that the person who has been bribed to help these criminals will help the other side if offered a heavier bribe to do it, but that if they suspected the police in the transaction there would be nothing doing?"

"That's something of what I was meaning," replied Mackay. "I can do naething mysel', for if a watch was kept they'd not return, and the same thing would happen if my men were seen in the deestrict. But as you are known to Mistress Rodenberg you could get her to give you some information concerning the folk there, and you might even be able to find the indiveedual who is aiding and abbetting these creeminals. You would pass the worrd to me, and mebbe we could set a trap that would catch them. At present I am handicapped on account of the fact that some of my superiors are wanting in imagination."

"Quite, and I will gladly undertake to help you, Inspector," replied Bessington, with a smile. "After all, it is the duty of every loyal subject of His Majesty to help in the frustration of crime in his dominions. Therefore I will gladly undertake to find out what I can, and if I succeed, to let you know. If, on the other hand, nothing further occurs, then we may take it that your fellows at Headquarters are right and the gang who have been caught are the same who have been operating from the tower base."

"That's juist my way of thinking," was the reply. 'It's not often that we pollis ask for outside help, except, maybe, from the Press at times. But in this instance I have no alternative, for I believe there is something that wants looking into still."

"I agree. Very well, Inspector, I shall get over there as soon as possible, and acquaint Mrs. Rodenberg of the reason for my visit. I am sure she will help in any way she can."

"Weel, pairhaps," was the guarded reply. "But I'm no' sae sure o' that. Women are queer cattle to deal with, and there's no accounting for tastes. After all, it was a queer place for a rich body to buy unless she had a braw reason for the purchase."

"You are surely not suggesting that Mrs. Rodenberg herself is in league with the smugglers, are you?" asked Bessington, smiling.

"I'd be a clever mon if I could suggest a reason for what any woman does, Colonel," was the reply.

"Well ,at any rate, you can bank on its not being that, Inspector."

"I'm glad to hear it and I wish you the best of luck, sir," was all he got in answer.

And on the following morning Bessington dispatched his telegram to Ardenmore.

CHAPTER XII

RICHARD BESSINGTON ON THE SCENE

RICHARD BESSINGTON's first act on arriving at Ardenmore was to apologize to Hermione for breaking his compact.

"On my own account I would not have come," he explained, as they stood together outside the house, while the chauffeur took Crosby's car—lent for the occasion—round to the garage. "Unless, of course, you had asked me. But it was on Inspector Mackay's advice that I came and for no other reason."

"Inspector Mackay!" she repeated blankly. "But what on earth has he to do with you?"

"He realizes how interested I am in this smuggling business, and he knows that—as a good citizen—I am all out for helping the police to track them down. So he practically asked me to undertake a small job for him which is better done by a civilian."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Hermione. "What can you or anyone do that the police are unable to undertake?"

"Well, to put it quite simply, in this rather out-of-the-way part of the world, policemen are regarded with suspicion by the natives—we are not. Therefore, if Inspector Mackay or any of his men were to come round asking awkward questions—I mean awkward

for anyone who had something to hide—the odds are that they would get nothing for their pains. Whereas, let you or I or Daneham do the same thing, we might achieve something."

"I begin to see what you mean," replied Hermione, who had every intention of showing outward friendship for this man whom she feared. "And yet, what is there that we can do, or who is there who might be suspected?"

"Well, but it was Daneham, wasn't it, who suggested to Mackay that it looked as though someone living here or hereabouts was in league with the gang of smugglers, and that if the watch was called off, perhaps we might see fresh developments."

"Ah! I understand now." She paused for a moment wondering what she should say—what to tell him, how much or how little. She and Frank had agreed together, after dispatching the wire telling him to come, that if the subject of smuggling was mentioned, it might be better not to say anything about their experiences of the night before, as it was a matter which—if referred to at all—should be told only to the police, and neither of them were willing, for the moment, to say anything about it. Phillimore had been asked to keep it quiet, on the plausible grounds that if the police were told they would at once set a watch there again, and so long as a watch was kept and information concerning it given to the gang, so long would they keep away. Whereas, by saying nothing, and waiting, the probability was that they would return, and then there would be time enough to get the police on to the scene.

All this was agreed upon between them before the advent of Richard Bessington, but now that his purpose in coming was explained—and Hermione had no reason to doubt the truth of his statement—it altered matters. It made it almost a necessity to tell him the truth, for it did not seem like playing the game to keep him in ignorance. There was smuggling going on and it was a Frenchman who was at the head of it, not Dominic Arden, and there seemed to be nothing now to connect him with the matter. They had, therefore, nothing to fear from Bessington. So, turning frankly to him, she told him of what had occurred on the previous night.

He was genuinely astonished and horrified and at once put the obvious question.

"But, my dear Hermione, why have you not sent for Mackay?"

She gave him the same reason that had been given to Phillimore and he agreed that it was sound as far as it went.

"And it looks uncommonly," he added, "as if you have seen the last of them. For since this Frenchman knows you are on the watch he won't be such a fool as to come back now that he has got safely away. It seems, in fact, that I shall do no good by making any inquiries. And yet Mackay is confident that something is wrong, and it seems that he is right, too."

"Frank thinks the man *will* come back, if not now, later. But, of course, he will only come if his informant here can assure him that no one is on the look out. He will know that we ourselves can't be for ever on the watch, and apparently their hiding-place is so

secure that he can afford to laugh at anyone who tries to catch him."

"Quite. So that our best plan would be to try and find out who *is* helping him." He smiled down at her, drinking in the beauty of her, wondering if this was at last the first step in a campaign that would end in capitulation on her part, triumphant possession for him.

"You had better come in and see Frank," she said, ignorant of what was passing through his mind, eager only to play the game as it should be played, and as she could play it so long as danger to one who might still be living was not involved. "Come into the smoking-room, I think he is there, and we can talk over and think out the most likely people, and then we can go round and see what we can do. I am just as anxious to get to the bottom of this mystery as you are. I came here for peace and quiet and so far I have had just the opposite."

"Poor little woman. I understand, and I'll do all in my power to help. Do you know, I rather believe that Mackay has a kind of suspicion that *you* are in league with the smugglers." Here he looked down into her eyes and smiled. "And that is why you bought this place. It was all I could do not to roar with laughter when he half-suggested it."

"No, really? Did he? Well, I thought he seemed odd, but I put it down to the natural suspicions of his calling. How absurd. And yet, I suppose it would strike some people as rather extraordinary."

They had turned and entered the house, and in the hall, Bessington put a hand on her arm and stayed her.

"One moment, while we are alone. No. Don't be frightened. Our compact holds good and I am not going to talk on forbidden subjects. But I do want you to tell me your honest reason for buying this god-forsaken place and burying yourself in it in this way."

"I did tell you," she replied, trying to keep the anxiety, which she suddenly felt at his question, from her voice. "I wanted to get away from people and the sordid things that are associated with the wealthy. Remember, Dick, that I am horribly, horribly rich, that everyone knows it, and that if I did not take action in this rather drastic manner, my life would be made a burden to me. I was simply sick of it all. That is my reason. What other could there be?"

"But, my dear girl, there were other means at your disposal. A yachting trip alone with your friend, Iza, if you wanted. There was a villa in Italy; there was Egypt, India, the whole world for you to choose from."

"I knew them all. Or at least, most of them; Lady Maude took me there. Besides, I wanted rest, and as for a yacht! My dear Dick, I am the most appalling sailor and I should simply have hated it."

"I see. That is, then honestly your reason?"

"Why! How ridiculous. Do you think I would lie to you? Why should I, and what do you mean?" A touch of annoyance had taken the place of anxiety in her tone now, and he was quick to notice it.

"Nothing, nothing," he replied, abruptly. "Of course I believe you. I asked because it has been not only puzzling me but a good many other people, too."

"Then I wish those other people would mind their

own business," she said petulantly. "All I ask is to be left alone—in peace."

"And what you get is to find yourself in the very centre of a sensational smuggling mystery," he replied, with a laugh. "Poor Hermione. Well, never mind. We'll see what we can do to wing these beggars and ensure you the rest and peace you want. So, let us to business."

His tone was natural, easy, and most friendly, and yet Hermione was not sure that he was satisfied with her answer. Also, she wondered if he had an ulterior motive in asking what he had done, and then justly considered that her own suspicion of him was fathered by the very fact of her own half-truth, and that she herself was withholding something from him and, in fact, doing exactly what she was accusing him in her heart of doing. She was honest with herself about that, and determined to make amends and to take him at his word. Nothing else on her part would be justifiable.

So they turned into the smoking-room, and Frank Daneham rose from the writing-table where he had been finishing some letters, and greeted the newcomer, if not cordially, at least in a passably friendly manner.

"What brings you over here, Bessington?" he asked, after they had shaken hands. Briefly the other explained what he had already explained to Hermione, and she in her turn added that she had told him of what had happened on the previous night.

Frank nodded, instantly guessing her reason. After all, he had no grounds—beyond the fact that Bessington had shown curiosity to the inspector—for supposing that he had come over for any other reason

than the one he had stated. Certainly, it was a sufficiently good one. Mackay had asked him to do what he could and therefore Hermione had been right in telling him of what had occurred. There were no two ways about that.

"It's a rum affair altogether, isn't it?" he said. "My only fear is that the fellow was speaking the truth when he said he was finished with the job. Only, somehow, my knowledge of human nature makes me doubt it. I can imagine the danger, excitement, and risk of the adventure gaining such a hold on a fellow of his stamp and mentality that he would find it difficult or nearly impossible to give up. Also it must be a very paying game."

"Undoubtedly. You are probably right. In my opinion, if we could clip his wings, or better still, send out false information by getting hold of his accomplice here and either bribing or threatening him into sending it—and people of that sort have their price—we shall succeed in laying him by the heels. The question is where to find this accomplice."

"There are very few to choose from, when one comes to think of it," replied Daneham. "So, as we have an hour before lunch, I propose that we four—I'll get hold of Iza, who has a keen business head—get down to the sifting of them." He left the room at that and returned almost immediately with the lady in question.

"A council of war, I understand," she said, as she shook hands with Bessington. "And about time we did something, too. When innocent people are drugged and otherwise ill-treated, apparently with impunity, it's about time to take action. And though, personally,

I have no grievance against the young man who presented Hermione and me with that bundle of priceless stockings, still I own that the Government has a very big one, and I suppose that in honour one is bound to help. So, to begin with, you can rule me out of your possible suspects, though I can't own to a clean sheet where the Dover Customs are concerned. But I draw the line at wholesale smuggling because I shouldn't make a success of it."

"One is glad to hear that, anyway," replied Daneham. "Let us take the servants first. All new, all English, except the cook, who is Irish."

"And old Betty," added Hermione.

"She is hardly to be numbered among the household, as she only comes in to help and lives outside. The Mackenzies at the farm consist of—Donald, the farmer, his wife, two kids and the old mother. Donald, from what I have seen of him, appears to be a staunch upholder of Law and Order and is the last man to suspect. His wife the same. The mother too old for that kind of game, the kids too young. Farmhands negligible, but probably worth interviewing. Gardeners all new to the place, and therefore ruled out. Keeper's Lodge at present empty and no ghillies on the place as yet. Ardenmore village—this I have discovered from the chauffeur, James—consists of a tiny kirk; a small post office whose mistress also keeps a general store; about a dozen cottages in which dwell the usual assortment of crofters—not the kind of people to risk their liberty in a business of that kind; a pub, owned by an ultra-respectable publican. Hardly, in my opinion, worth visiting."

"So far, it doesn't sound very promising," agreed Bessington.

"And even if there were any suspects among them," added Iza Marsh, "I doubt if you would get any forrarder if you did visit them. Also, I think you are beginning at the wrong end."

"Tell us, Marshy, where you would start," said Hermione.

"Well, who told you, or said anything in the first place, about smuggling at all?" asked the elder woman.

"Actually it was Mr. Bray. But surely you don't suspect him?"

"Suspect him? Fiddlesticks. One couldn't even suspect him of a harmless flirtation with an underhousemaid, let alone an enterprising stunt like smuggling. No. What I want to get at is, who told him about it; and then on down to bed-rock."

"I can't possibly answer that. He said there was a rumour about it, that lights had been seen and a mysterious car."

"Originating probably from old Mrs. Mackenzie," observed Daneham. "Anyone else say anything about it?"

Hermione was silent for a moment, and then of a sudden her face lit up.

"Why, yes, of course, Betty MacIvor said something about it on the night we arrived. She told me that no one dare go near the old tower, because there was something there that scared people, and she herself was apparently quite frightened about it."

Bessington laughed, and it was not a pleasant laugh.

"She was apparently warning you about it?" he suggested.

"Yes. I thought so at the time."

"Exactly," the colonel turned to Iza Marsh. "You are right," he said. "That was the end to start from. Why should this person, Betty, wish to keep people away from the tower unless she had a good reason for doing so? If she is the accomplice we are looking for, so long as the smuggling went on she is money in pocket. Who is the woman?"

"She was here in—in the Arden's time," said Hermione, and then glanced hurriedly at Bessington. He met her eyes and a queer expression crossed his face.

"Here in the Ardens' time?" he repeated. "Then she knows you?"

"I saw her here once, that is all, and I don't think she saw me. She knows nothing of my—my former life." Again they looked at each other and she saw suspicion dawn in his eyes. It was then that she realized that he also suspected what she had so nearly believed about Dominic Arden, and his next words confirmed it.

"I think we shall have no trouble in locating the go-between," he said quietly. "For *many reasons*—" these two words were emphasized—"it is quite possible to believe that the woman, Betty MacIvor, is the guilty party. I, personally, am pretty sure of it." And an odd smile exposed his gleaming teeth.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BARGAIN

THERE was something almost vindictive in the way in which Richard Bessington affirmed his conviction of the guilt of Betty MacIvor, and it was obvious to Hermione that he based his conviction on the fact of her having known the Ardens in former years, thereby conveying a tacit acknowledgment that what she was doing was done for young Arden's sake now—an acknowledgment also of Bessington's own suspicions on this point. So obvious indeed was it, that for a moment she felt incapable of continuing the discussion without showing the alarm that she felt on realizing this to be the case. So, with a word of excuse that she must see Phillimore with regard to a matter concerning luncheon, she rose abruptly and, telling the others to carry on without her for a moment, hurriedly left the room.

Both Iza and Frank understood her reason for going, and were glad in a way of the opportunity to discuss the matter freely, which, in her presence, seeing that it must infallibly bring in the name of Dominic Arden, they could not do.

"Why do you suspect Betty?" demanded Daneham, as soon as the door had closed.

"For many reasons. Firstly, she is on the premises

—actually within sight of the smuggling centre most days of the week. Secondly, it is the kind of job that a woman could undertake better than a man, who would be more easily suspected, and she appears to be the only likely female in the place. Am I right in supposing that she was caretaker here when the house was empty?"

"She was," replied Iza. "Her cottage is only a quarter of a mile away, nearer the sea."

"Exactly, and therefore nearer the tower. Can she read or write?"

"That I don't know, nor yet how she could send her messages, for the post office is twenty miles away."

"Well, at any rate, we can find out at the post office if she ever went there to post letters."

"Is there any other reason why you suspect her?" asked Daneham, who was watching the other man's face and knew that something ulterior was in his mind.

"N-no, perhaps not," he hesitated. "It did occur to me that living with the Ardens she might also have gained knowledge of certain secrets connected with the tower. Did she, or rather has she, at any time mentioned them to you?"

"Nothing very much," replied Iza. "I tried to draw her the other day and all she said was that she used to come and do the rough work of the house, that she saw very little of the Ardens and less of young Dominic who was, in her jargon, 'a guid laddie though albeit queer in his ways', she only saw old Mr. Arden once after his son's death when he came there to ar-

range about selling the place. And it was only after young Arden's death that she heard of his marriage and did not know whom he had married, and I did not enlighten her," added Iza crisply, "because Hermione had asked me not to."

There was silence after that, an uncomfortable silence. Everyone felt tension in the air, and Iza Marsh, in her abrupt way, put an end to it.

"Well, there seems to be nothing gained by prolonging the discussion any more. We appear to have arrived at a definite conclusion, and the sooner we set about testing it the better. I only hope that my methods of investigation have not put poor old Betty in the cart, as she is a good soul at heart, I think. When do you propose to make inquiries at the post office?" she turned to Frank.

"Directly after luncheon," he replied.

"Then I'll go in with you if I may," she said.

"I shall be glad of your company," replied Frank.

At luncheon, a little later, the atmosphere still seemed to be strained, though everyone tried to appear normal. They talked on ordinary topics, avoiding mention of what was uppermost in their thoughts. And all the time Hermione was conscious of one desire only. To come to open grips with Dick Bessington. To challenge him to be honest with her and tell her what he really thought, why he had come, why he had suspected Betty. And all the time she knew what answer he would make. But far from deterring her it made her the more determined to get down to bedrock—to be done with deception—to get to the real truth of things.

When finally the meal was over and the car ordered, she avoided any private conversation with Frank. She did not want him to know what she contemplated doing, for she felt sure he would try to dissuade her. It was, therefore, with a sigh of relief that she saw the car depart, and turned to the man who was standing beside her.

"Dick," she said. "Why do you really suspect old Betty?"

"For the reasons I have already specified to your two friends, which I presume they gave you," was the reply.

"Yes, Iza told me, but they don't sound convincing to me, and I am sure you have another."

He regarded her for a moment, and realized that she knew he was keeping something back.

"Yes," he admitted: "I have another reason, but it is nothing really, I would rather leave it alone for the moment."

"And I insist on hearing it," she spoke sharply. "I insist on knowing what it is, and also why you came here."

"My dear girl," he protested. "What is all this heat? I don't understand."

"Oh yes you do. You know perfectly well, and I hope you will be honest and tell me and not force me to tell you what I think it is."

They were in the drawing-room facing each other, and Bessington, realizing that he had to deal with a determined woman and knowing now that subterfuge was no longer of any use, threw down his cards, and for the first time showed his hand openly.

"Then I'll tell you," he said, quietly. "I am here because, from something Mackay told me, I suspect what I have for long enough suspected, that your first husband, Dominic Arden, is alive, and is mixed up in this smuggling enterprise. I suspect Betty because she worked for the Ardens, and would, in all probability, do all she could to help young Arden, if he should ever ask for help. These are the two questions you asked me and I have answered them. More than this, I tell you candidly that I believe you have bought this place because you too, thought he was still alive and might return to it, and that is why you are here and not for the reasons you have told me. Come now, are you satisfied? At least, I am honest with you, now be as honest with me."

For a moment there was silence, and then Hermione faced him, but instead of making a statement, she asked a question.

"If you thought he was still alive why did you persistently ask me to marry you?"

"Again I will be honest," was the reply. "It was because I loved you so passionately that I wanted you at any price, right or wrong; it did not matter to me, it never could matter. More than that, as you never spoke of him, I thought you had got over your grief, that if you became my wife I should make you so happy that you would even forget the little that you probably remembered of him. I thought that in cherishing his memory at all—if you did—you were cherishing an idle dream from which you would awaken when you became my wife. And you would have been my wife by law, for considering all the

evidence in support of his death and the number of years that have passed, the law would certainly presuppose him to be dead.

"That is why I asked you to marry me, why I still ask it, and shall never cease to ask it until you comply. Oh, Hermione! Don't you understand? Can't you see that you are the only thing that matters in my life? That I can't live without you? That I would do anything, right or wrong, to possess you?" There was intense passion in his voice, in his eyes. Never had she seen him so intensely moved before, and for a moment remorse seized her, for she knew that she had been partly to blame.

"I see this," she replied, slowly. "I see that I have been wrong in not telling you what I feel. It is true that when I refused you on account of the fact that I did not love you, I was speaking the truth. But I should have said more. I should have told you that I couldn't marry you because I still love my first husband more than all the world. I see now how wrong I was and I am bitterly sorry. I did not realize what you felt, or what my refusal meant to you. Now I see it, and I can only ask you to forgive me, and to put me finally out of your thoughts."

"And that's quite impossible," he replied. "Out of the question. For even now, in spite of what you have said, I feel that you are still under a delusion. You believe that you still love this man, but—tell me, Hermione, if that is so, how could you have married Rodenberg?"

"I married him for his money," she replied, frankly. "Because he was an old man and could not

live long. Because at his death I knew I should be able to buy back Ardenmore. I did not love him, and I hated myself for marrying him, but I did so, thinking that I was free to marry. This I can swear to. I never for one moment believed that Dominic was alive then."

"Then when did you begin to do so?" he demanded.

"I have not said that I do."

"No, but I know that you think it. I'm sure of it, and I believe that what has made me certain of it was the same thing that led you to believe it possible."

"Tell me what you mean," cried Hermione. "I don't understand."

"Yes, I'll tell you. Now that we are throwing our cards down so recklessly, the whole pack may as well go. From the moment when Inspector Mackay told me of that scrap of paper with the date written on it, I was certain that Dominic Arden was alive. Now, come, be honest with me, did you not think so, too?"

"So you knew of that?" she gasped. "And that is really why you are here? To—to—try and get hold of him, to hang him! And you tell me that you love me! You!" She gave a harsh, discordant laugh and turned away from him.

But Dick Bessington seized her arm and swung her round. "I did not say so," he said, sharply. "Nor do I mean it. But come, you haven't answered me. I asked you if that date that was found made you believe that he was alive. Tell me, you owe it to me to tell me."

"I owe you nothing," she replied proudly, never even deigning to free her arm from his grasp. "But because you have been honest with me I will be the

same with you. Yes, I did believe it had some connection with him. I think—though I have tried not to do so—that I think so still. Even in spite of the fact that the Frenchman denied all knowledge of him. In spite of what he said, I still think it has some connection with poor Dominic. Now, will that satisfy you? And what do you mean to do?"

"I am going to marry you, Hermione, in spite of all you have said to me, in spite of everything and everyone," was the quiet reply.

"Please don't talk nonsense," she said, coldly. "Dominic is my husband, and if he is alive I shall find him and go to him."

"Good God! Hermione, think what you are saying," he exclaimed. "How could you be happy joined once more to a man who is a hunted criminal? Who is wanted for murder and who would spend the rest of his life in being hounded from place to place? What happiness could come of such an existence? I shudder even to think of it. Your love for him, which, after all, is only a foolish sentimental dream, would soon die under such conditions. All the riches in the world would not be able to help him—once he is known to be alive—or you. No, my dear. Be wise, give up all thought of this man, I beg of you."

"And that I refuse to do," she replied. "I shall do my utmost to find out if it is true or not that he is still alive, and if I do find him I shall join him, help him, die for him if needs be. My only fear is that we are both wrong, that he is dead and has been dead for nine years, and that I shall join him only when I die. There, I have nothing more to say; I suppose

now that you will go to the police with your suspicions and get them to help you to find him yourself."

"No," he replied, quietly. "I shall do no such thing. This is a personal affair and I intend to carry out my investigations privately. For I, too, am as keen to know if he is alive as you are, though for a different reason."

"Yes," cried Hermione, with blazing eyes. "You want to hang him, to make sure once and for all that he is dead."

But at that Bessington only smiled.

"My dear child," he said reproachfully, "can you seriously say this—to me? Can't you see that if I did such a thing as that, I would be cutting myself adrift from you for ever? I should then indeed deserve your hatred, not your love. No, I want to find him for a different reason to that, and I'll tell you what it is. There is one point in this affair that neither of us has touched on. I refer to the fact that the young man Arden—if alive—and this I believe to be a certainty, has been at great pains to keep away from you, hasn't he?"

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"I mean that if a man really loves a woman, there is actually nothing that will keep him away from her except physical force. And yet, though this young man has the means to come here—by which I refer to the boat used by the Frenchman—and though it must be obvious who Mrs. Rodenberg is—for your name is very often in the papers, and the fact that you bought this place was extensively advertised—yet, he makes no attempt to see you. Strange, is it not?"

"He would not care to drag me into his troubles—" she began, but Bessington stopped her.

"Nonsense," he said. "That would not come into it in this case. He could get over here and see you without being seen. No, my dear, that won't do, and I'm afraid it is the one factor that will at last bring you to see things from my point of view. I say afraid, because it will hurt you when you get to know the truth."

"I don't believe it for a moment," said Hermione, defiantly, but with no real conviction in her heart. For what Bessington had said was true, though her pride refused to allow it for a moment. For, to put it plainly, if Dominic was not dead, why had he not been over to see her?

"So true do I believe my suspicions to be," went on Bessington, watching her tell-tale face, "that I am ready to make a bargain with you, and it is this: If, when I find him—if I do—I find that he has ceased to care for you, well, then, I take action, for which in your heart you could not blame me, and I demand your promise of marriage. If, on the other hand, I find that you are right and I wrong, and that there is a valid reason for his staying away from you, then I declare most solemnly to you that I will do nothing more in the matter and will let him go, at whatever cost to me, and God knows what a cost it will be. For they are no idle words, Hermione, when I say that I can't live without you."

She was silent. What was there to say? If he meant this, then there was nothing but gratitude in her heart for him. But she felt that he would not offer such a

thing unless he was quite sure of the issue, and either it would turn out that he was right and Dominic had forgotten her and ceased to care, or else Dick Bessington never meant to carry out his promise, and, somehow, she could not really trust him. And yet she had to do so. For the offer on the face of it was fair enough. She would have to agree to the bargain, for if she refused he would have every right to go to the police with his story.

"Very well," she said, quietly. "I agree, of course."

"Thank you," he replied, gravely. "I have your permission, then, to make what investigations I like?"

"Of course, that is understood in the bargain."

"And may I take a walk to the tower?"

"Certainly, you can go where you like," she replied. "You are just as likely to find the secret as I am, and I have failed. I don't think that anyone will find it."

But in that she was wrong.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECRET OF THE CLOCK

"WELL, what do you think about things, my dear man?" asked Iza Marsh, as the car swung along the Ardenmore road.

"About things?" repeated Daneham. "Meaning, I suppose, about Dick Bessington."

"Bother the man! Of course. Is it necessary for me to cross my t's and dot my i's, or were you merely giving yourself time to think how you should answer my question?"

Frank Daneham smiled. "How well you know human nature," he said.

"Being very human myself and prone to subterfuge, I naturally judge most people *as* myself. Come, out with it, is it to be the truth, or what you think is best for me to know?"

"I think that sort of thing would hardly work with you, would it, Iza? No. I did honestly doubt if I should tell you my real opinion, but your subsequent remarks showed me the error of my ways. Candidly then, I am not pleased."

"And neither are we amused," added the stout lady. "In my opinion Colonel Bessington has an amazing impudence to come and thrust himself here, interfering in something that doesn't concern him."

"But I'm afraid that it does, in a way that all crime concerns good citizens. Beside, he was asked to do so by Mackay."

"But, my dear man, why didn't Mackay come himself and ask the people living on the spot—by which I mean us—to help him, if he couldn't manage the job himself?"

"For the very good reason that he doesn't trust the people living on the spot," was the relpy. "And I am afraid I must admit in all fairness that he is perfectly right. Though he was quite polite to me when I went over to see him, I felt, all through the interview, that he was not sure of me, and you heard Bessington admit candidly that he actually suspects our Hermione. In the circumstances, therefore, I approve his choice of Bessington, though I do not approve Bessington's motives."

"Ah, then you think he is out for something more than to assist justice?"

"I think we all feel that he suspects something more than meets the eye. For one thing—which for obvious reasons I did not tell Hermione—it appears that Mackay told him about that bit of paper and the date, and, you know, he is one of the four who know the meaning of that date. Naturally he must have sat up and taken notice when he heard of it. Equally naturally he would come over on the very slightest excuse in order to look into it. I only wish to God I knew the truth myself instead of this racking uncertainty."

Iza Marsh was unusually silent for a while.

"I didn't know this, of course," she said at length. "It makes all the difference. It proves why the man

is here, and in my opinion makes his offence in coming the greater. Has he no heart? No feeling? If he is in love with Hermione, how does he reconcile this wish to hound down the man she cares for, or, at least, in whose memory she is bound up body and soul, with a desire for her happiness?"

"Simply because, I suppose, he refuses to believe that any woman can remain true to the memory of a man who is supposed to have died nine years ago. He will put it down to ridiculous sentiment, to a dream, to an idea that will die a natural death directly she becomes his own wife. I can sympathize in a way, for it is most unusual, I own, especially in these days when death has not been of so much account since the War, and when sentiment is at a discount and the hectic journey of life gives one little time for thought or remembrance. Also, one must remember the kind of man he is. Hard in a way, mercilessly unforgiving where anything touches himself—and Grimshawe was a great friend—and having only one devouring passion in his life—his love—selfish, animal love perhaps, but love all the same—for Hermione. We have got to take all that into consideration before we begin to judge him."

"Well, I suppose you are right," she admitted, grudgingly, "but I'm not as good-natured as you, Frank. I never liked the man and Hermione knows that perfectly well. I'm devoted to her—unselfishly devoted, thank God—and I own I would sacrifice myself to help her if necessary, so that I can't understand anyone who pretends to care for her not doing the same. If Dominic Arden is alive, for God's sake

let Bessington leave him alone. If he was as much in love with our girl as she with him, what a hell of misery and torture he must have gone through in all these years of separation. Surely that is punishment enough; and that, to my mind, is the geatest mystery of the whole affair—how he could have kept away from her, made no attempt to see her. And that is the one overpowering fact which proves to me that the man must be dead after all."

"Granted, again. It is as great a puzzle to me, and God knows if we shall ever solve it. I'd—yes, I'd give my life, gladly, for Hermione, and if it was for her happiness I'd do my damnedest to bring the two together again—if he's alive—but somehow, I can't see that it is for her happiness. I don't refer now to the possible results to himself if he came back here, for I believe that if Bessington could be induced to hold his tongue, nothing would be done about it. No one troubles now about a crime which took place during a hectic year of war, and no one would take action unless forced to do so, and unless the whole thing was raked up again and the witnesses alive and able to come forward—no, I don't mean that. What I mean is that I am not sure of Dominic himself. The lad I knew and loved would have come to her at whatever risk, if only to see her, to know that she was happy. But this man, if he is alive, has done nothing. He remains, to all intents and purposes, dead, and yet alive enough to be mixed up in a criminal smuggling enterprise."

"Yes. If that paper really had anything to do with him," struck in Iza quickly.

"Exactly. And there again we are up against it. The Frenchman said it was given to him by a pal, because he had a bad memory and could not remember the date, so he wrote it down. But what had the third of December to do with a smuggling enterprise, undertaken in early May? Oh! Hang it all! This is like going round in a vicious circle and getting nowhere. Let us, for mercy's sake, drop the subject and talk of something else."

So they chatted inconsequently until the tiny village was reached, and the car drawn up outside the diminutive post office.

Frank Daneham sprang out and made his way through some staring, gaping children into the tiny room which smelt of a strange mixture of peat, apples, and Harris tweed, and where behind the counter he saw the little woman who acted as post-mistress and who greeted him with a smile.

"It's a graand day, sir," she said, with a welcoming smile.

"Wonderful, Mrs. Fergusson; it is good to be alive on such a day. Can you let me have five shillings' worth of three-half penny stamps, and are there any letters for Ardenmore House?"

"None at a', sir." She busied herself with the stamps, and Daneham put his first question.

"I suppose you have few customers for stamps, Mrs. Fergusson?"

"A' weel, sir, not so many to be sure. Though now and again a body comes in for a stamp and a crack, but it's the gentry at Ardenmore House that are my best customers."

"I suppose so. Do you ever see anything of old Betty MacIvor?"

"Auld Betty? No, sir. It's ower twelve months since she were here."

"But I suppose she gets some of her provisions from you, doesn't she?"

"Oh aye. Now and again. One of the laddies from Mackenzie's Farm happens in on his bicycle and takes back what he is wantin'."

"Stamps, I suppose, among other things?"

"Nae. Never a stamp, sir. I've never known Betty MacIvor to post a letter in her life."

"But she can write, I suppose?"

"Oh aye, she can write and read, but she does na' write letters. Will that be all right, sir, and is there anything mair you will be needing?"

"Nothing, thanks. But tell me, Mrs. Fergusson, has a letter ever come through your hands addressed to any of the newspapers? Anyone sending an advertisement in, you know, would address to a newspaper?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir," she shook her head emphatically. "No, I'm quite sure of it, for I would have noticed it and called it to mind. But you'll be wanting to know for a reason? Has anything miscarried, by chance?"

"No, no. Mere idle curiosity. Well, thanks very much. I'll be getting back now."

"You'll be hearing of the smuggling, pairhaps?" she questioned, reluctant to let him go without learning something of what had been an exciting event among the villagers. "I heeard tell the pollis were aboot and had kept a watch at the tower yonder."

"Yes, they did, but as nothing happened and as the gang was caught farther south, of course nothing further has been done about it."

"Aye, to be sure, so we heeard, but I wondered if it was true or not. I'm glad they're caught, for it's ill-doing to have the likes of such gentry aboot the place."

"Yes, I think we can lie safe in our beds now, Mrs. Ferguson. Well, good evening."

He went out and got into the car.

"Nothing doing there," he said, as he backed into a side-lane preparatory to turning. "Betty has never been known to write a letter in her life and there have been no letters sent to any newspapers. So I'm afraid our little theory is not going to work. I wonder what Bessington will have to say to that."

"I don't care what he says, I know what I think. And that is that if it's not Betty, it's certainly someone else. Information has been sent by someone, but how?"

"I'm hanged if I know, and for the moment I'm not going to bother," replied Daneham. "I've done my bit in coming here, now Bessington can do his in finding out how it *has* been done. I expect he's thought out an alternative to Betty."

But Richard Bessington was not concerned with Betty MacIvor. He was at that moment striding up the grassy slope towards the old tower intent on one thing only—to discover what connection, if any, the words written on that bit of paper had with the tower and the gang who were engaged in their felonous enterprise.

He first of all proceeded to examine the building

from outside, and, a lover of the antique, was filled with admiration at its massive structure and good preservation. It was, indeed, difficult to imagine why there was only the one tower remaining. But when he considered that the destruction of the rest was probably due to cannon balls, he concluded that it was sheer luck that had left the one tower standing at all.

Wondering how the battlemented top of the building was reached, he soon discovered, on going inside, the walled-in circular stairs, the first few steps of which showed through a tiny doorway. His first act, therefore, was to ascend to the top and take a look at the surrounding view. It was a wild and rugged scene, with a vast expanse of sea showing through the opening in the little natural harbour. An ideal landing-place, an ideal watch-tower. But as there was nothing to be learned up there, he retraced his steps and stood once more in the bare chamber.

And here the first object that caught his eye was the clock in the wall, a curious object to find in such a place. Perhaps the Ardens had placed it there, having used the room as a schoolroom, or office. But examination of the object in question showed him his mistake. The clock was of ancient make, obviously built into the wall over a century ago, and apparently now hopelessly out of order. It must, he thought, have been a wonderful piece of mechanism in its day, and he examined it more closely. Clocks, however, had no sort of interest for him at the moment and, turning away, he began a systematic examination of the walls and floors and found them solid and without flaw.

And yet Frank Daneham had sworn to the bales of silken goods and to their subsequent disappearance, and from the nature of the ground it was quite impossible that a car could have come to within a hundred and fifty yards of the tower, and yet, had they carried the goods by hand down to a waiting car in the woods, Hermione must have seen them on her way to look for Daneham. For it would have taken even two men a considerable time to do this.

Where, then, had they hidden the stuff during the time that Daneham lay drugged and helpless in this very room?

He sat down on the chair and tried to think it out, and as he sat, his eyes gradually roamed back to the clock embedded in the wall in front of him. And there, finally, they stayed.

Why was it there? What was its purpose, save to indicate the hour, the day, week and month, which now it failed most completely to do?

He rose and went to it and examined it again more carefully. What were those numbers for, up to a hundred, and completely circling the outside? One hand was there which might point to a number. It was at the moment pointing to the number 92. He would see if it moved, and putting up his hand took hold of it and drew it downwards. And then he paused and stared, for in moving it he had discovered that it covered another hand, and, out of curiosity, he moved that also to the right. Underneath was a third hand and again a fourth.

Four hands evidently meant to point to four figures. Why? He looked at them as they now pointed haphazard where he had moved them. The first

pointed to 92, the second to 98, the third to 1, and the fourth to 5. What was it for? Ninety-two, ninety-eight, one, five. Adding the numerals together they made thirty-four, and adding up the entire amount, one hundred and ninety-six. And that told him nothing.

He looked at the other dials, moved the hand which indicated the months and placed it to May. Then he tried the hand which showed the days and placed it at Tuesday. For no reason at all he moved the hand on another dial which indicated thirty-one figures—obviously the days of the month to—15.

"Let's see," he said aloud. "That makes it Tuesday the fifteenth of May." Once more he glanced at the outer round of numbers with the four hands, and, with an ejaculation of amazement at his own stupidity, he moved the hands to the figures—1,9,2,6. "Of course, that's it. When in working order the thing gave the exact date. Now it is Tuesday, the fifteenth of May, nineteen-twenty-six. What an ass I——"

And then he stopped, clapped a hand to his head and stared at the clock before him.

"By God!" he muttered. "Of course, that's it. It's a combination safe!"

And very carefully he began to move the hands on every dial, changing them until—instead of the date which they had indicated before—they now showed Monday, December the third, nineteen-seventeen.

CHAPTER XV

THE SMUGGLERS' CACHE

As the car swung up to the door, Hermione came out and stood in the opening, watching its two occupants rather anxiously. Iza Marsh got out and Daneham drove round to the garage.

"Well, my dear, you look scared. What's the matter?" demanded the elder woman.

"Nothing. Tell me, what did you find?"

"Nothing either. But my nothing is true, yours is not. Tell me, what is it, child?"

"Oh, really nothing, it doesn't matter, I suppose," she spoke wearily. "Dick and I had words, but we understand each other now, so that's something."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Though you don't look too overjoyed by it," commented Iza, crisply. "Where is the man? Gone, I hope."

"Oh, no. He has gone to the tower. He has a perfect right, of course, to do what he can to help the police, but—well—of course, I shall have to tell you—he really believes that poor Dominic is alive—and—and mixed up in this business. He knows about the date on the paper, and he means to find him if he can. We have made a sort of bargain. I was in a way forced to make it; besides, in a way, he is justified. He says that as Dominic has never been near me it

means that either he is really dead, or that he has ceased to care."

"Yes, my dear, I can't help agreeing to that," said her friend. "It's my one stumbling-block. Well so I suppose the bargain is that if he finds he does still care and in some way or another can't come to you, he'll sheer off and leave him alone, is that it?"

"Yes. But if, on the other hand, it is as he thinks it is, then—well, you can guess what will happen then."

"Yes, child, I think I can. And if he sticks to his bargain, well and good, but will he?"

"That's it. I don't feel that I can trust or believe in him, and I'm terribly frightened of what will happen and—and—" But here suddenly Hermione, who had gone through much during her friend's absence broke down and the next instant was in the stout woman's arms.

"My poor darling. Don't cry, child, and don't worry. If your boy is alive, he shan't fall into that man's hands, bargain or no bargain. My word! I could gladly shoot the brute for worrying you like that. But the worst of it is we can't afford to quarrel with him or prevent his coming here. He's got us on the score of the smuggling stunt. And if we objected he would have a perfect right to go to the police, and that we don't want at any price. All we can do is to carry on and try and beat him at his own game—by low cunning. How it's to be done, I can't say for the moment, but there'll be some way, my dear, and after all, you may be distressing yourself to no purpose. How do we know that there'll be anyone to catch? That Frenchman said he had done. Well,

perhaps he had. At any rate, Bessington can't stop here for ever, and he can't stay here unless you ask him to. So what he proposes to do, I can't imagine."

"He is staying only twenty miles away," replied Hermione, drying her tears. "He can come over here at any time, night and day. There is nothing to prevent him. And if we refuse to allow him, very likely the police will come, and they will station a destroyer or a Government boat of some kind in the bay, and then Dominic will *never* be able to come, and how can I know where he is? Don't you see, dear? I am longing, aching for him to come. If I could only find the person who is signalling and bribe them to send for him, I would give all I possess, indeed I would."

"I know. I quite see that, and I'm afraid in the matter of the signalling person we are as far off as ever. Betty has never sent a letter from here in her life. So it looks as though it's not her at all."

"Then who is it, who can it be?"

"I don't know, my dear, but I've got an idea in my head and mean to see what comes of it. I intend to walk over to the cottage myself while Betty is working here, and do a bit of poking round. And I'm going directly after we've had tea. And here's Frank, so just tell him all about it and don't worry any more."

It was impossible to feel despondent with two such cheerful and optimistic friends.

"Let him hunt, he'll find nothing," said Frank Daneham. "If the police did not, and you and I and the sharpest woman in the world—represented by Iza—did not, why should he? He can do nothing, after all. Above all, do not let us quarrel with him. If our

friends, the smugglers, are coming back, they will come; worrying won't stop them. And when they come it will be at night. Bessington won't be here at night. My only fear is that they won't come. And I should very much like to meet that young Frenchman again and return the compliment he paid to me." He turned to Iza, with a smile. "By all means go and poke about at Betty's cottage," he went on. "I don't know what you think you'll find or even what you propose to look for, but go, if it seems good to you."

"It's only a theory," was the reply, and directly she had had her tea she went.

Betty MacIvor's cottage was in the direction of the tower, but further inland, and to reach it, several fields had to be traversed by a narrow path. On the way there Iza Marsh had a good view of the tower, but so far as she could see from that distance, there were no signs of Colonel Bessington.

"Perhaps he's drawn blank, feels a fool, is afraid to face Hermione after his disgraceful behaviour, and has gone home," she thought, and continued her walk in happy ignorance of the true state of things over at the tower.

Arrived at length at Betty's cottage, and having overcome her preliminary sensation of bewilderment and amazement, that any human being could bear to inhabit such a lonely dwelling all by herself, she first of all knocked perfunctorily at the door—well aware of the fact that no one was within to answer it—and finding it locked and the windows fastened, she proceeded to prowl round the premises in search of anything suspicious in the nature of telephone

wires, which at first she had thought might possibly exist, but which her search proved to be unfounded.

There was a small garden at the back of the cottage, and what looked to be a fowl-house at the end of it, but neither sign of cock nor hen, or anything appertaining to the farmyard did she see. At which her hopes rose abundantly, and her steps quickened along the path that led to it. And here she found what—as she would put it—common sense had told her to look for. The end of the fowl-house, instead of being made of solid wooden boards as were the other three sides, consisted of fine meshed wire netting, and, looking through this, she saw, instead of the domestic fowl, five very fine pigeons.

"Carrier!" she exclaimed, triumphantly. "So now we know, and that's one up to Bessington, drat him! All we have to do now is to threaten old Betty with exposure and we have the field to ourselves."

With which optimistic solution of all their difficulties, she started back on her way home. And once again glancing across over the rugged bit of moorland which separated the area of agricultural ground upon which she walked and the jagged rocks near the sea, she noted the absence of anyone at the tower, and supposed either that her first surmise had been correct, or else that Colonel Bessington had gone where she was now going.

"To report failure," she thought, with a nod of her head at her own success. "Which, by the way, he shall not share. If Betty is to be dealt with, she will be dealt with by us."

But if she had been successful, how much more so had been Richard Bessington.

No sooner had he tumbled to the meaning of the clock—the solving of the mystery of which had taken him as many minutes as it had taken Dominic Arden days—than he proceeded to put his discovery to the test.

He first of all adjusted the hands pointing to the respective figures to an exact and minute nicety, guessing that the mechanism of the safe—as he supposed it to be—would require that before it would open. Having done so, he took hold of the left side of the clock face and pulled it towards him.

To his intense surprise, instead of the clock face only opening and revealing a receptacle for depositing stolen goods, the whole length of the wooden structure—of the grandfather type—came forward, revealing not a safe but another door exactly corresponding with the clock face and with the same dials and hands, only on the reverse side. And whereas the clock opened inwards, the second door opened outwards and revealed an opening in the wall through which a man could pass with ease, and the top step of a flight of steps which disappeared into darkness.

For a moment he stood where he was looking down into the black depth from which a cold, damp, musty draught was coming. This, then, was the answer to what had so puzzled Frank Daneham. Namely, how the Frenchman could have got the goods away in time without being seen by Hermione that night. This, too, explained where he must have lain hid while the police inspector was keeping his

watch. Obviously a room beneath the tower, possibly even another exit that way. But of this he must make sure. What a thousand pities he had not thought to bring his electric torch with him, now lying uselessly on the table beside his bed at the Glen.

All he possessed was a cigarette-lighter which, when ignited, burned a tiny flame until the methylated spirit was exhausted. He had fortunately had it replenished that morning and for want of a better it would have to serve. So he lit it and slowly and very carefully began his descent of the stairs, pausing only to feel with his stick and make sure that the next step was solid. At the fourteenth step he struck solid ground, and by dint of careful pacing found that he was in an underground vault of some twenty feet square and which had an opening at one end large enough for a fair-sized car to pass down.

Down this passage or tunnel, therefore, he went, hoping fervently that the light would hold out until he had gained the end, wherever it might lead to.

It led, after fifty yards' walking, straight down in a steep incline right into a wide and swiftly-running river which appeared to run underground for some considerable distance, and at the end of the tunnel he saw the faint light of day and the vision of pine trees.

Here he had, perforce, to stop, having no wish to get wet and, indeed, not feeling absolutely sure that he could stand up against the force of the water, which looked, in the faint glimmer of his light, exceedingly deep, but which to his surprise, when he tested it with his stick, was not more than a foot in depth.

"Easy for a car to make her way up that," he thought. "And no one in their senses would ever dream that down the river—even if they dared to venture through the tunnel—would be found an entrance to the tower. Wonderfully ingenious, and not surprising there was a mystery about a car."

So thinking, he turned and, as he did so, his tiny light flickered and went out. But it would, he reflected, be easy to find his way back, for there was but the one passage, and he knew that at a bend in it some way along, he would see the glimmer of light through the clock at the top of the steps to direct him.

And as he felt his way back, passing a hand along the rough walls of the tunnel—hacked out, no doubt, by smugglers some hundred or more years ago, and once more used by the descendants of their trade—he wondered what he should do with his knowledge.

One thing now was certain, and that was the fact of Dominic Arden's existence. For it must have been he who, with sardonic humour, had set the clock at that date, and afraid or too wise to come himself again had told his friend where to set the hands in order to open the secret door, and because that friend was afflicted with a bad memory, had written it down for him.

What should he do? Keep the knowledge to himself or tell the police, and let them set men to watch in the underground room? That, perhaps, was his duty; his duty, too, to tell those at Ardenmore House. But was duty always necessary? After all, it was he who had discovered the secret, not they or the police. And if they knew, Hermione, at least,

would do her best to thwart him in every way. If, also, he told the police, the matter would be taken over by them, and he would have no more say in it. And he wanted a say, very badly indeed.

But also, he could do nothing alone. Single-handed, he would be powerless against the smuggling gang if they returned. And there was only one man whom he could ask to help him. On the other hand, did he keep it to himself and manage to capture any of the gang, what would the authorities say when they discovered that he had known of this place and had not informed them?

Above all, what would Hermione say?

It was a very nasty problem which he had to solve, and he realized that he had only the time during which he would walk that half-mile back to the house in which to solve it.

He gained the steps at last, mounted them and then examined the back of the clock which had now swung back against the wall. He saw that each number consisted of a steel disc which, as the hand pointed to it, shot out, fitting into a corresponding blank space on the other door, which opened inwards over the steps. In order to set the clock it was necessary to stand on the second step with a light and with the other door closed. There were dials and hands exactly similar to those on the front face of the clock, and according to the position in which those were set, so only could the door be opened by setting them on the face of the clock in a similar position. Then when so set, the clock must be drawn into place, the hands moved to any figure or number save those set at the

back, when automatically the discs would shoot out, clipping the two doors together, and rendering them immovable until the magic date was reset once more on the clock face, when again the discs would shoot, this time into space, releasing the doors from one another. Once forget the date fixed on the back, and woebetide the unfortunate criminal wishing to escape at a moment's notice through the secret door. For the combinations were so many that it would be almost impossible to hit on the exact date by accident. Even should he get the year exact, the month and the day, if the date of the month was wrong, that disc would still hold the two doors together, refusing to release them until the magic number was set.

"A wonderful contrivance," he thought, as he drew the inner door to, swung back the clock face, and began to readjust the hands. He placed them as near as possible to where he had found them, tried the door, and discovered it firmly shut. Then, with a glance at his wrist-watch, which showed him it was past five o'clock, he set out upon the walk home.

And on the way he made up his mind as to what he should do. Right or wrong he had told Hermione he would win her. By fair means or foul— After all who should be a judge as to what was fair in love?

He reached the house as Iza Marsh came down the garden path on her return from Betty's cottage.

"Well," she said, cheerfully, "find anything?"

"Nothing at all," he replied, quietly.

"Same here," said she laconically, and wondered if the man was as big a liar as she was.

CHAPTER XVI

BETTY MACIVOR'S POSTAL SERVICE

It was with a feeling of intense relief that Hermione, Iza Marsh, and Frank Daneham heard the retreating hum of the car as, ten minutes later, Richard Bessington took his departure. They parted on friendly terms, each conscious that they were withholding some knowledge of vital importance from the other; each sure that they were justified in so doing.

"I can but report to the police our failure so far," Bessington had said. "But I will tell Mackay that you people here are going on with your investigations into that signalling, and if you want me, I shall be only too glad to come over. I have finished the search on my own account, but only for the moment," he added, with a meaning glance at Hermione. "For our bargain still holds good, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she replied gravely. "I am not afraid," she added.

"Nor am I," was the reply.

And so they parted, Bessington to return eventually to the Glen to think out what would be his best plan of action, while the three others were left with a sense of freedom from a menace which none of them could actually define.

"I wonder if that man is the most unmitigated liar

on earth or if I beat him by a short head," was Iza's first comment, as the three returned to the smoking-room—the most comfortable room in the house—where they proposed to hold a short conference before dinner.

"What do you mean, darling?" asked Hermione, who was tired and dispirited, and racked by a haunting fear that even should they succeed in finding her husband, they might also find that Bessington was right in his surmise and she was wrong.

"Well, I'll tell you," replied the other, cheerfully. "It's a bit of good news and you both look as if you wanted bucking up. I kept it, too, until that man had gone, and that was some task, I assure you, as I was bursting with it. But I was afraid that if I told you before he had gone, you might by a look or even a hesitating manner give the show away, and Dick Bessington is as cute as a C.I.D. man. The fact is, my dears, that I have discovered that Betty MacIvor *is* the guilty party, and I know the means by which she sends her warnings."

"No? Marshy! Not really?" Hermione's voice, which a moment before had been listless and sad, was suddenly full of tense excitement. Frank Daneham uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

"Good Lord! Do you mean this?"

"I do, bless you. It's a good stunt, too. She sends them by carrier pigeon. She's got two brace and a half shut up in a fowl-house."

"Oh, Marshy! And we never thought of that!" cried Hermione.

"Exactly. I thought of telephones, but not

pigeons and in looking for wires I found the birds. So all we have to do now is to tackle her, and you, Hermione, have got to do it."

"By Jove!" cried Frank. "Well done you! Fancy Bessington and I never thinking of that. Of course, the thing's easy. There must be someone living not too far off from here—one of the receivers of the smuggled goods, possibly a well-known tradesman, otherwise eminently respectable and respected among his fellow-men and an ardent supporter of law and order. He gets the message, sends the advertisement to the papers and along come the rest of the gang either with more goods or else to take off the returning smuggler. Easy enough indeed. But why should Hermione be the one to tackle the old girl?"

"Because she'll be able to get at the soft side of her," was the reply, "and she's got a strong card to play."

"I know what you mean," said Hermione, with an unwonted sparkle in her eyes and speaking openly on the subject on which, until then, she had maintained a marked silence. "She has no idea that I am Dominic's wife. After all, who thinks of me as anyone but the wealthy widow, Rodenberg? Yes, I'll do it. Anything to get him here! To know—once and for all. Oh! It seems too wonderful to be true."

"It's true, all right, my dear," said her buxom friend. "And the sooner you see her the better, before the police get more suspicious and send a Government boat along."

Hermione glanced at the clock.

"Betty will have gone home by now, so I'll put my things on and go to her cottage. It will be better in

any case to see her there."

So once more a lonely figure started out upon a lonely walk, and this time the knock upon the door was neither perfunctory, nor did it remain unanswered.

Old Betty appeared in the doorway, and seeing who her visitor was, smiled a welcome, and asked her to come in.

"Whiles I'm hoping there's naething wrong at the hoose, my leddie," she said, as Hermione, feeling suddenly troubled and anxious, followed her in. What if she denied it? What if, after all, Iza had been mistaken and it was not Betty who sent the messages?

"No, it's not for that I have come," was the reply. "I came to see you, Betty, to—to talk to you." The two went into the tiny kitchen which smelt strongly of peat, and was clean and tidy. "I want—" said Hermione, hesitating, "to tell you something that I have not told you before. Something that I have kept a secret—because it hurt me to speak of it."

While she spoke the old woman stood watching her intently, her deep-set, sunken eyes brightly expectant, but with never a trace of fear in them.

"Will you no' be seated, my leddie?" she said.

"No, I'd sooner stand, Betty." She took the plunge. "Listen, did you know that I had been married twice? But, of course, you did, didn't you?"

"Nay. I kenned naething aboot your leddyship's former life," was the reply.

"Well, it's about that that I have come to tell you," went on Hermione, "and to talk about the Ardens."

"Aye, dearie me." The old hands went up in a gesture of sorrow. " 'Tis a sad tale that. They were guid folk were the Ardens of Ardenmore."

"You knew that their son was married, didn't you?"

"Aye, to be sure. I heeard tell of a marriage before he ganged oot to his death. But 'twas in London that it happened, and when the family were awa' in London we heeard naething of them until they returned. And soon after that word came of his death, puir laddie."

"Would you like to know the name of his wife?" asked Hermione.

"Nay, what matter now that he is deid these nine year. Belike she is married again, as most of the wummon did when their menfolk were kilt."

"It's true, she did marry again," said Hermione. "She married a wealthy old man, knowing that she would inherit his wealth and so be able to buy back Ardenmore, which was the place that Dominic Arden, her first husband, loved more than anything else in the world. And, Betty, listen—she did buy it back, and it belongs to her, and she is telling you about it now—Dominic's wife."

With a shrill cry the woman started back, staring at Hermione as though at a ghost.

"You!" she cried. "You!"

"Yes, I. I am Dominic Arden's wife, and I love him just as I loved him when he went out to fight for his country. And—oh, Betty! I have mourned his death for nine long years, and now I want him to come back; so I have come to you to beg you to send for him. For you know that he is alive, don't you?"

And with that she stretched out her arms to the old woman in mute appeal.

Betty MacIvor made no movement towards her. She still stood there staring blankly at the beautiful woman before her, and ages seemed to pass before she spoke again.

"Me?" she cried, in a high, shrill voice. "And is it that you are asking me to send for him? The laddie who has been deid these nine years? Surely your leddieship is no' richt—surely—"

"Oh, Betty! Don't be afraid of me. You can trust me to keep your secret," cried Hermione. "I'll never give you away. You have sent messages before, by carrier pigeon, and you can send them again."

And at that suddenly the old woman tottered backwards and caught unsteadily at a chair for support.

Instantly Hermione's arm was about her and she lowered her gently into a chair.

"There. Sit still for a moment. And, above all, don't be frightened. Your secret is mine, Betty, and you and I are going to work together."

"The pollis?" gasped the old woman, hoarsely, and looked fearfully towards the door. "If they are aboot and hear ye—"

"They are not about. They know nothing. It is only we at the house who know and we are all your friends. Tell me, Betty, am I right? Is he alive? Oh, for God's sake, tell me."

"Aye, he's alive, puir laddie, he's alive," said Betty, and at that Hermione's reserve gave away completely. She sank into a chair, and leaning forward, burst into uncontrollable weeping.

It was the old woman now who put an arm about her, crooning to her, crying at times herself, talking incoherently, but with a new tenderness in her voice, for Hermione, during the short time in which she had been among them, had made herself well liked by the people on the estate.

"And I didna' ken that you were his wife. Aye me, puir laddie, he was ower here the once, juist before you came, but as the pollis were there I couldna' get to see him, not to speak to, mind you. I saw him only from a distance, for he dursn't be seen here. And when he and his foreign friend had gone, I found that the pictures and the books in his aul room were awa' too. So I kenned what had happened and I held my tongue."

"Oh, Betty!" cried Hermione, and catching the gnarled hand she held it fast. "To think that he was here on the very day I came, and I not to have known it! To have even heard him go—for I heard their boat—oh, it was hard indeed," she choked back a sob. "But go on, please. Tell me everything."

"There is naething much to tell," she replied. "A year agone, while the aul hoose lay empty, a boat came one nicht into the bay and a foreign gentleman came to this cottage and tould me that young Mr. Dominic was alive and living in France with him, and that he had come to ask my help in an enterprise that he and the young master were wishful to do, but that he couldna' come himself to ask me. The foreigner was a nice-spoken laddie, with a smile nae doot and an eye for the lassies, and I took to him and agreed to help, though nae doot it was against the

law. But there's naething I wouldna' do for my young master, lawfu' or no. So when danger is aboot I send a carrier pigeon with a message to a gentleman, of whose name and address I ken naething. He brocht the birrds in a machine and left them, and the foreign gentleman he pays me for my trouble."

Hermione was on her feet now, listening eagerly to every word the old woman was saying, though one fact alone was dominant in her mind—the fact that her husband was alive. Why—why—had he not come to her—written to her? Was Dick Bessington right after all? No, she couldn't believe it.

"Did the Frenchman say nothing about him—about Mr. Arden?" she asked eagerly. "Did he speak of him? Where he was? If he was well?"

"Aye, he tould me he was well and that he lived with him at his hoose in France. But he said naething mair, nor yet of his reason for biding awa' frae here, except that it was na' safe for him to return."

"But he'll come if you send a message," urged Hermione.

The old woman shook her head. "I think not," she said. "His friend, aye, he'll come for sure, and if you see him you can send a message to your man."

"Where is that friend now, do you know?"

"Nay. I ken naething. But he'll be on this side of the Channel. For when he returns after his journeying south with whatever it is that he brings ower here, the boat is in the bay to meet him, and he signals with a licht on the top of the tower, and his men come and fetch him awa'. But I've seen no licht, and ken weel that his machine was hearrd on the Arden-

more road going south some few nichts sine. 'Twas Mistress Mackenzie who tould me, for she's a puir body that can do naething but sit and watch the doings of ither folk and crack with her neighbours."

"Do you know where he keeps his car when he returns?" asked Hermione, but again the other shook her head.

" 'Tis a secret that there's no finding. The young master, he knew it and tould his friend. I'm thinking it bides here somewhere in a cave in the rocks."

"Very well." Hermione's voice was decided. "There's only one thing to be done now, Betty. We must send a message to this Frenchman and get him here at once. The police are doing nothing at present, but later they may again put men on to watch the tower, so we must act quickly. Are you willing to send a message, Betty?"

"Aye, that I am, this very evening I'll send a birrd wi' it, and 'twill be in the papers in twa days and nae doot but the man will come on the following day. If you will leave it to me, my leddy, I'll see to it the noo."

"What will you say?"

"Juist the twa worrds 'All clear'. 'Twill bring him; and the men on the boat, wherever they be, will scan the papers daily and see it and be there to tak' him back to France. Oh aye, 'tis simple eneuch."

So simple indeed, that when, half an hour later, Frank Daneham and Iza heard of it, they both in their heart of hearts felt that it was too simple, too easy. But not for the world would either of them dream of saying so to the radiant Hermione. Though

the story she had to tell them on her return from the cottage was the death-knell to Frank Daneham's hopes—if, that is, he ever had any—he showed nothing of what he felt, only intense joy at her own happiness coupled with the personal joy he experienced in knowing at last that the boy whom he had loved as a youngster and had mourned as dead, was actually, and in truth, alive.

"And if he can't come back, at least I can go to him," she said to Iza Marsh, when they were alone for a moment.

"Poor child. I only hope nothing will happen to prevent it," was her silent comment, which was, after all, merely an echo of Frank's own thoughts.

They had, as a matter of fact, all three omitted one factor which was of paramount importance, and this was that those who, with evil intent, resort to lies and deceptions in order to cover their tracks, usually count upon those they are seeking to outwit as doing the same thing themselves. The maxim which Richard Bessington invariably followed, namely—that to do evil that good might follow was in most cases justifiable, was not, however, followed by those he was trying to outwit. There was no thought of evil in what they were doing and, in consequence, they thought no evil of Bessington; believed, in fact, that he had indeed discovered nothing.

He, on the other hand, with the guilty knowledge that he had lied to gain his own ends—which he knew to be evil—judged the others as he judged himself. He did not, in fact, believe that Iza Marsh had discovered nothing. In the few moments' conversation he had had before taking his departure, and in

which she admitted having gone to see Betty and finding nothing suspicious, his alert mind had jumped to the conclusion that she was lying, as he himself had lied. Undoubtedly, she had gone there, but she had found something.

Therefore, when he drove away down the avenue and out into the road, instead of bidding the man get back to the Glen as fast as he could, he bade him drive slowly until he came to the entrance to the farm, and there he told him to draw up by the side of the road and wait for him. Then he walked up the steep incline to the door of the rambling old building and knocked.

A large man, wearing muddy boots and with a pipe in his hand, answered the summons.

"Good evening," said Bessington, in his suavest manner, "you are Mr.—er Mr.—"

"Mackenzie is my name," was the short reply.

"Ah yes, to be sure. I have just come from Ardenmore, and was asked to give a message to a woman called Betty MacIvor, and I'm not quite sure where she lives. I was told, but have got wrong in the direction somehow. If you would be so good as to tell me I should be exceedingly obliged. I believe it is somewhere near here where she lives?"

"Aye, to be sure. Betty MacIvor bides in yonder wee cottage, but half a mile fra' here," was the reply, and he pointed as he spoke across the moor towards the sea. "But there's no road for a machine, only a wee path across the fields fra' here, though there's a better fra' the Hoose. If you'll walk through yonder wood and across the burrn, you'll see the cot-

tage on the brow of the hill, and then 'tis but a matter of ten minutes' walk."

"Thanks. I'm much obliged to you," replied Bessington, and returning to the car, he took his field-glasses, which he had flung on to the seat thinking they might be useful in his investigations, and telling the driver once more to wait for him, he started out upon his walk.

It was rough going and took him longer than he thought and when, finally, he reached the edge of the wood and looked across at the other hill where a tiny cottage appeared in the clear light but a stone's throw away, it was to see the tall slim figure of Hermione walking quickly up to the door.

He smiled as he saw her, though in a way it altered and spoiled all his plans. For he could not interview the old woman while she had such a visitor in the house, and if he waited until she had gone, it might make him late for his return journey.

Wait, however, he would. He could at least spare half an hour, and so, sitting down on a fallen log, he took out his glasses and began his self-imposed vigil.

Twenty minutes later Hermione appeared at the door and walked hurriedly towards her home. At the same moment he saw the figure of another woman emerge at the back of the house, go down the garden to what appeared to be a hen-house, and disappear behind it. But she was not long out of sight, and reappeared almost immediately holding something in her hand. It was not difficult to see through the powerful lenses that the object was a pigeon.

With the bird in her hand she once more entered the house, and after a few minutes, during which Bessington wondered if he should go and see her or turn back to the car—fearing to be late for dinner at the Glen—he saw her come out once more, hold the bird high up in the air, and then, with a toss of her arm, let it fly. It circled once, twice, thrice, and then like a shot from a gun was away, flying due south.

"So that's that," observed Bessington, with a grim smile, as he rose to his feet and hurried back to the car.

CHAPTER XVII

A KEEN ALLY

RICHARD BESSINGTON was never slow to make up his mind, but there were occasions on which caution was necessary, and this was one of them, and it took him the twenty miles between Ardenmore and the Glen to arrive at a definite plan of action. Had he belonged to the crook fraternity, it is very certain that he would always have "worked" alone, for he trusted no one, and, moreover, had a very poor opinion of the capabilities of other people in the matters which required delicate handling. But very certain it was that in this instance he could not work alone.

From the moment in which he had heard of the date written on that scrap of paper, he had realized the possibility of something of this nature happening, and which he now found himself up against. Therefore, in view of the likelihood of help being necessary, he had taken the trouble to cultivate the friendship of the only man staying at the Glen who might be useful. Brains were not a necessity, his own being, in his opinion, all-sufficient. It was just a matter of additional man-power—two more hands, possibly another automatic—in fact, another man on the job, for single-handed he could do nothing. He had gone carefully over all the men at the Glen and had grad-

ually eliminated all save Alec C sby. His brother John was out of the question—he was far too concerned about his position as Laird of the Glen and its many thousand acres to risk being mixed up in any such enterprise as Dick Bessington had in view. Captain Leslie, also, would have fought shy of it, and, moreover, would undoubtedly have notified the police of what was afoot—or have advised him to do so and leave it to them to deal with. And so with the rest until he came to good-natured, vulgar Alec Crosby. Instinctively he felt that he could trust him—as far as it was in his nature to trust anyone—and the man who worked with him must, of necessity, be one in whom he could place a modicum of trust.

He had known Alexander Crosby previously. Had counted him a bore and a fellow who was not in his own sphere in life. But though he was aware of his shortcomings, he was equally well up in his good points, not the least of which was that if he chose he could hold his tongue when necessary. Also, he was a man without nerves, and cute up to a certain point; furthermore, if it came to a matter of physical violence—which was quite likely—his muscular development would count for something. But he had one weakness, and that was a vein of sentiment which made him too prone to pity the under-dog, whether he be unlucky or merely deserving of punishment. And unless he could be made to see that Dominic Arden was so deserving of punishment and not of pity, and that in removing him from Hermione's path he was performing an act of charity towards her and not one of cuelty, he would be useless as an ally. Other-

wise, Alec Crosby was undoubtedly the man for the job. The French smuggler, who would soon be on his way to the tower in response to another advertisement message, had to be taken, and Bessington could not do it single-handed. It was obvious, therefore, seeing that he had actually seen the message dispatched, that in a matter of three or four days at the most, this Frenchman would be back. The only difficulty being that Hermione, knowing that the message had been sent, would also take steps to watch for his coming, if not actually for the coming of Dominic himself, when the matter would then become extremely complicated. For he wanted to be on the scene without anyone else being a witness to what followed. If the worst came to the worst and she and Daneham made trouble, he could, of course, threaten to call in the police. But he did not want to resort to extreme measures for his own sake. He wanted to do the thing quietly and to have no scene. Neither did he want to be mixed up in it publicly himself. All he asked was to get the Frenchman into his power, and once there he could deal with him and the rest of the situation. He would, of course, compromise with him—offer him his liberty on certain conditions. No man in his position would be fool enough to refuse, and then—if things were as he guessed they were—Dominic Arden would not be given the choice of a return to his wife, nor yet would the doubtful issue of his punishment at the hands of a leniently inclined Government be put to the test; that was far too risky. No. Dominic Arden would simply disappear—really disappear this time once and for all, and the way would be clear for himself with regard

to Hermione. For once let her believe that Dominic had forgotten her, or preferred his liberty and exile to the risk of punishment—perhaps death—if he joined her, and she would be his—Bessington's—for the asking.

But it all wanted carefully thinking out, carefully arranging. At present he had left her with the idea that he had temporarily given up the chase, that there was nothing to discover, and, in fact, that the whole thing for the moment only was a wash-out. So far so good. Well, there was nothing for it but to enlist the services of Crosby, and the first opportunity he had he would put the matter before him.

He did not, however, get that opportunity until they retired for the night, and then, instead of going to his own room, he followed Alec Crosby down the passage and asked if he might come in for a moment and have a chat.

"By all means. Come along, old feller. There's a decent fire here and lots of arm-chairs. You've got something to spill, I expect?"

"Just so. I want, after I have—ah—spilled the facts, to ask you if you will help me, as I find that I can't do the job I want to do single-handed."

"If it's laying the smugglers by the heels, I'm on," was the reply. "Not that I wouldn't do the same thing myself if I got the chance, but I suppose it's high time these fellows were stopped, and, incidentally, I'd like the fun of the thing. Did you happen on something when you were over there to-day?"

"I did," was the reply, "and that's what I want to talk to you about." Whereupon, he proceeded to tell

of his discoveries, omitting only the fact that it was the Ardenmore people who had got on to the carrier pigeon idea, and substituting instead a very graphic account of his own activities in discovering it.

"And," he ended, "they none of them know that I know," which was true enough, "and I don't want them to know, for a very particular and good reason which I must ask you to take on trust."

"Right you are," replied the other genially, "I'm not the lad to question the bona fides of a man like Colonel Bessington, not likely. And as far as that goes, you've done all the spade work, so it's right you should get the kudos. But tell me, in all this, does that young feller, Arden, come into it?"

"Not that I know of," replied the other. "How can he? He daren't show his nose in the British Isles. He's in hiding, and I want to know where. Once let me get hold of the Frenchman and I'll make him divulge."

"But that'll be rough on the lady," objected Crosby, as Bessington knew he would.

"No, it won't. At present she looks upon him in the light of an ill-used martyr and exile. You and I, on the other hand, know that he is a criminal eluding justice. Once let it be proved to her—as it will be, you'll see—that he prefers to let her imagine he is dead and break her heart for him rather than risk anything by letting her know of his whereabouts, and she will cease to regard him as an ill-used hero. Women are all alike: attack them, hurt them on their tenderest spot—their pride—and from angels they become demons, as you very well know. And, after

all, if it comes to that, what shall I be doing but proving the truth to her? You have only got to look at it from a common sense point of view. If the fellow is alive—and we practically know he must be—why has he not sent word to her all these years unless he prefers to remain where he is, away from her? He must read the papers, he must know that she married Rodenberg, that she bought Ardenmore and is living there, and yet, though he has the means of going there—as we know from the Frenchman's activities—he does nothing of the sort. He stays away, and will continue to stay away, until he is forcibly brought back, and I, perhaps, may be the one to bring him. Why, the thing is simply obvious."

"Of course, I see that," admitted the other. "That clock stunt is not a thing that any man would jump at in a million years, so it proves that Arden is alive, for he must have told the smuggling johnnie about it, probably came over himself to show him, and then re-set it with the date of his own supposed death. Yes, I see all that, but—I don't want to do anything that will hurt her."

"Hurt her?" repeated Bessington, with raised brows, "But surely if you feel like that, how much more do I? I would not hurt her for the world. I want to help, to save her from this mad obsession of hers, and I will. Come, now. Let's have an understanding. You come in with me, and if we succeed in capturing the Frenchman and getting the whereabouts of Arden out of him, I'll promise you on my word of honour to do nothing against him—provided that he is willing to return to his wife and take the

risks it involves. If, on the other hand, he refuses, then I think you will admit with me that he deserves all he gets from me. Come. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes, if you'll agree to that, I'm your man," replied Alec Crosby.

"Then that's settled," replied the other with a sigh of relief. "And now, as to ways and means. What do you advise?"

"Well, I've been thinking about that carrier pigeon stunt. It strikes me that if we are to succeed, we shall have to act pretty quickly," said Crosby.

"I don't see that," was the reply. "The message has to arrive at its destination, say a big town about fifty miles or less south. The person who gets the message inserts it in the dailies. He'll do that tomorrow, the advertisement will be out next day, the papers will be read in France on that same afternoon. The boat starts off at once, and can't get here in less than forty hours, however fast they go. Say three nights from now, that is when we should be there on the watch.

"No," said Crosby, abruptly sitting up in his chair. "You're wrong there, old feller. I thought you told me there was no car in the underground room. Don't that mean that the Frenchy is still in this country? For all we know he may be waiting at the very place the message is taken to. Well, all he has to do is to send a wire to his confederates on the boat to meet him on the following night, and—there you are. It's not three nights we have to wait, it's

just to-night, and to-morrow we must be there. See?"

"By Jove! You're right!" exclaimed Bessington. "I wonder if they'll have thought of that at Ardenmore."

"It's quite likely they haven't, and will be waiting for the advertisement in the paper and never think of the Frenchy wiring or phoning to his messmates. That's where we'll get in front of them. Yes, my son. You bet your boots that's what'll happen. It's a blinkin' lucky thing for you that you told yours truly about it, or you would have been properly in the cart. Eh what?"

"It's certainly odd I never thought of it," admitted the other with a frown, and concealing his chagrin at not having done so as best he could.

"Not a bit of it," was the genial reply. "You'd got the advertisement stunt fixed in your mind, that was all. I'm usually rather a dab hand at pouncing on the obvious, and as I hadn't thought of the advert part of it, naturally I had a sort of open mind about it, and was ready to jump at the bright idea. Our difficulty now will be how to get away to-morrow without letting the folk here get wise to our game. I can tell old John, of course, that I'm fed up with his party and am going south, put up at an hotel in Locharbie, and wait for you. But how about your excuse? Will it look odd both of us leaving together in that hurried manner?"

"No. Fortunately I told your brother the other day that I might be going to stay at Ardenmore, so I

can easily say that my visit has been hastened, and then join you as you suggest at your hotel. You've got your car, so we can go off there any night we like, and, of course, the Frenchman may not turn up to-morrow night, after all. In any case, we shall have to park the car at the edge of the wood so that it won't be heard at the house, and do the remainder of the journey to the tower on foot, make an entrance into the lower room via the river, and there await our man."

"Yes, quite so." Crosby was silent for a moment. "The only thing about that combination door that I don't quite tumble to is how the feller gets in from the other side if—as we know is the fact—the hands are not placed in position."

"I have thought of that, too," admitted Bessington, "and I imagine one of the men from the boat will be there to open the door and let him through."

"Yes, but supposing his man or several of his men are waiting for him in that upper room, we can't tackle them—desperate armed beggars as they are—and hope to get away with it," objected Crosby.

"After all, that's only surmise on my part," replied the other. "Now I come to think of it, it seems doubtful that the secret of that door is known to anyone but the Frenchman. He will probably—after running his car into the lower room, go round the other way by the river, send up his signal for the boat and get away without going into the upper room at all. The secret door, I should say, is only used when a quick get-away is necessary, or when goods are to be

taken down to the car. So, if we catch him, while I hold him covered with my revolver, you can go round —we'll take waders, of course—and set the door for us to come through. After that, it depends on the Frenchman as to our next course of procedure."

"Quite. I get you," replied Crosby. "So now you get to bed, sonny, and sleep the sleep of the just and righteous and all things will be added unto you. We'll have that Frenchy right and tight to-morrow night, and very shortly you'll be able to put the lady wise as to the real character of her first husband. In any case I wish you joy over the business, for, 'pon my soul, I think you deserve it. I've known what it is to be head over ears myself, and as all's fair in such cases, I wonder you didn't do something desperate long ago, and you are content to play the game now even if it's to your own loss. By gad, sir! I count myself lucky to be in with you in this stunt. We'll shake hands on it."

Colonel Richard Bessington winced as the other's plump but honest fist grasped his own. For at least the hand he held was clean, whereas his own was not, and he knew it. But a moment later he salved his conscience by repeating the other's words.

"After all," he said, as he turned at the door, "as you very truly said—'All's fair in love'."

And in his bedroom he wrote a short note to Inspector Mackay which was delivered by hand next day, and the note ran as follows:

Nothing doing so far, but in a few days, with luck, I hope to be able to tell you something. If you don't hear from me you will know that your Headquarters are right and we are wrong.

Bessington.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COMING OF ANTOINE DUBOSC

"THIS reminds me of the good old days of my boyhood," said Alec Crosby with a chuckle, as he and his companion skimmed over the road to Ardenmore in his car on the following evening.

But Richard Bessington had no smile in return and was grimly irresponsive to his friend's good humour. The fact was that his conscience troubled him, though he would not have admitted it either to himself or to anyone else, and, furthermore, he was over-anxious that things should go well and not miscarry, and anxiety of mind invariably had the effect of putting him into a bad temper.

"It's no laughing matter," he said. "Not if anything goes wrong. I am up against Inspector Mackay for fooling him and taking over his job—if he gets to hear of it."

"How can he?" was the retort. "The only thing we have to fear is that the Ardenmore people—some of 'em—may also be on the watch to-night. Though I think that's not at all likely. I expect they are sitting down waiting for that advert. to appear in the dailies, and until it does they are not going to lose a night's rest in fooling about watching for someone

who is not likely to turn up. So don't get scared, man. You'll see it'll all turn out all right."

"I'm not scared," was the reply, "only worried."

"Which is more or less the same thing, and gets you as far, anyway. What puzzles me a bit is what exactly is going to come of your interview—plus revolver—with the Frenchy."

"I'm satisfied to leave that on the knees of the gods. Once get him in our hands and I've no doubt that he'll tell us all we want to know."

"In return for his liberty?"

"Exactly."

"And then, I suppose, he's free to go back to his own country, give his friend Arden the tip, and when you land up there, you'll find the bird flown."

"Ye—es," replied the other in a slow drawl. "That's quite possible. One has to risk something."

"If the fellow's a sport he'll never give his friend away," said Crosby.

"There's no such thing as honour among thieves," was the dry reply. "So don't worry about that. It's an exploded theory."

"I wouldn't bank too much on that, my lad," said his friend. "I'd simply hate to have dealings with a feller who gave a pal away."

"One has to swallow one's better feelings in a case of this sort," observed Bessington, hoping that this squeamish fool was not in the end going to give trouble. "After all, it is in a good cause."

The other did not answer, and after that silence reigned for some time, while the worthy car ate up the miles and finally was brought to a standstill at

the edge of the pine forest, which stretched in an unbroken line for a mile and a half past the house and up to the old tower by the sea.

The moon was bright and showed the two adventurers the best place for parking, namely, behind a huge boulder, and well out of sight of any chance passerby—a not very likely one—on the road. When this was done, both men, with waders over their arms, an electric torch apiece in one pocket, and a serviceable weapon in another, struck into the wood and made their difficult way to the entrance of the tunnel. It was ten o'clock when they set off, and their watches pointed to a quarter-to-eleven when, finally, they arrived, tired, anxious, and one at least in not too good a temper.

At the brink of the river, whose waters looked black and far from inviting in the dim light, they stopped.

"I'm going round to investigate," said Bessington, as he flung the waders on the ground. "We don't want to be caught napping, but if all's well I'll return at once and we'll go right into the underground room."

"Why not both go round and through the clock door? suggested his companion, who did not like the look of the fast-running water.

"Because, though there may be no one here now, there may be later, and a glance at the clock set to that date would give us and the show away."

"Ah, I see. That's true. Well, so long. Come back as soon as you can. It will be devilish dismal here by myself."

"It'll be worse in the underground room," replied

Bessington, and with that reassuring prophecy he went on his way.

Twice he paused, his heart beating uncomfortably, as he heard a twig snap, and thought it was another prowler like himself. But, as no further sound occurred, he guessed it must be a rabbit, or a marauding cat in search of prey, and continued his way until the tower door was reached. Here he placed an ear to the keyhole and listened, but all was silent within. Away at sea there was no sign of a boat or vessel of any kind, and he wondered if, after all, his friend had been too sanguine in expecting the smugglers to turn up that night.

In any case they could but wait and, if nothing happened, return again on the following night. Then he pushed open the door and went inside.

A quick glance round showed that the room was empty, and he turned his eyes to the clock. He saw at once that the hands had been moved, and that the four hands denoting the year, and which he had replaced one on top of the other as he had found them, had been separated and were now apart, one pointing to 100, another to 50, the third 25 and the fourth 75, thus forming a cross. Someone, then, had evidently been trying to discover the use of the clock and had failed to do so.

Instantly an idea occurred to him; he pulled out a note-book and jotted down the day, month, and other figures which were now marked by the hands. It would be easy to re-set the clock on the other side according to the diagram and so avoid having to go round to set the hands to the original date. Then he

retraced his steps, took one more look at the sea, and at length rejoined his companion.

"Deuce take you, Bessington," growled Crosby. "What a hell of a time you've been."

"I have re-set the clock so that we can get through as soon as I copy it on our side," was the reply. "Now for our waders."

"That's a brainy idea and will save me another swim," agreed Crosby, his good humour instantly returning.

The two waded through the river, Bessington, who was tall, having to bend his head in order to avoid contact with the roughly-hewn roof overhead, the swift current bearing them along with it. Besssington, in advance, had his torch going, and very soon found the opening into the second tunnel. A moment later they had climbed the rather steep incline and were standing high and dry in the dark passage and divesting themselves of their waders.

"I never saw anything so blinkin' ingenious in all my born days," commented Crosby. "The feller who thought this out deserved to get away with his job. Not one in a million would ever think of a passage through a river. Crooks had brains a hundred years ago as well as now."

"Let's get on to the cave," said Bessington, hurriedly. "I only hope the fellow hasn't come and gone and that we are too late for him."

"If he has we shall know by his car, which will be comfortably parked in the cave," was the reassuring reply.

But there was no car there and the two men

proceeded to examine the place carefully with the aid of their strong electric torches.

"Hold quite a lot of wine and spirits in the good old days, eh what?" said Crosby with a laugh. "I expect they rolled the barrels to the mouth of the cave, and then floated them in the river to where a hay-cart or something equally innocent-looking was waiting. My! What wouldn't they have given for cars in those days. However, I expect they get better dibs out of the ladies' underwear now, and far less bulky to negotiate. I say, Bessington, old pard, I'd give a good deal for a smoke."

"Not on your life, man. The fellow would notice it directly he entered the tunnel and turn tail. I'm afraid you will have to abstain for a bit. Also, I think it's wise to turn out our lights, the tunnel is fairly straight, and we may exhaust the batteries uselessly. I wish there was any possibility of seeing through into that upper room. If anyone came in there no sound would penetrate down here."

"How do you know there isn't a spy-hole?" suggested the other. "There's the picture of a moon, didn't you say? Well, it must be for some purpose beside an ornament. Do you remember if it was at full or half or what?"

"First quarter, I think, but I didn't take much notice."

"Well, why not have a try?" As he spoke he climbed the steep stone steps roughly cut out of the rock, and, standing on the topmost one, began to examine the reverse side of the clock. The moon was at the full, and gently moving the disc he turned it to

the first quarter. Nothing resulted. Then he tried the last quarter and instantly a shaft of air blew into his eyes.

"Got it," he said. "But it's so infernal dark in there that I can see nothing. However, it's a spy-hole right enough, and at any rate we can hear if anyone is there, even if we can't see." And with that he closed the moon disc and descended once more to his companion.

For half an hour they waited, alternately pacing to and fro, and sitting down on two old barrels, which appeared to be the relics of a former generation of smuggling enterprise.

"Waiting is a damned tedious job," observed Crosby, who was getting tired of his companion's persistent silence. "And waiting in the blinkin' dark is depressing as well as tedious. I wish the feller'd come, get it over quietly, and allow me to return to my downy and a stiff nightcap."

"If he comes at all, it will be soon," was the reply. And hardly were the words out of his mouth, than a shaft of bright white light pierced the darkness and sent them both staggering back into a corner of the cave out of its searching rays.

They had not calculated on this. Bessington had expected the motorist to come in without lights, forgetting that he would feel so secure in his hiding-place that he would see no necessity to turn them off.

Soon the purr of the engine came to the waiting men's ears.

"Quick! Behind the barrels!" whispered Bessington, and they both sprang for shelter behind their former makeshift chairs.

Then into the chamber there loomed a long low shape whose two bright headlights looked like the glaring eyes of some hideous monster, and the driver of which was in shadow.

Presently the car stopped and there was a movement from inside, and at that moment Bessington touched his companion's arm.

"Now!" he whispered.

Instantly two flashlights were turned on to the figure getting out of the car, and two automatics levelled.

"Hands up!" called Bessington, sharply.

"*'Cre Nom!*" exclaimed a startled voice, and the man in the car flung up his hands and stared at his two assailants.

"Turn out those headlights, Crosby," rapped out Bessington. "And don't move, you, or you'll drop."

There came a sudden laugh from the man in the car, as Crosby crossed to the switches and fumbled.

"Ah, I see! You prefer to work in the dark, is it not. It is that one on your left, monsieur. *Voila.* That is better?" he added as the lights went out.

And now the two men—no longer blinded by them—saw a tall, slim young man arrayed in a leather coat and helmet, with a good-looking, pleasant face and bright twinkling humorous eyes. He spoke with a slight accent and at the moment, he was smiling broadly.

"*Alors, messieurs.* It seems that you are here first," he said. "Which is greatly to your credit, for I thought my stronghold was impossible of detection. It shows how one may be mistaken. So, then, what is our next move?"

"Get out of the car first," ordered Bessington, and with careless ease the young man obeyed.

"And just remember, Mr. Frenchy," here put in Crosby, "that my pal there is the finest revolver shot in Europe, so no tricks, mark you."

"Ah! Is that so indeed? Permit that I felicitate your pal, monsieur. And for me, it is an honour to be held up by so great an expert, almost as great an honour as to be shot by him, *parbleu!*" Here he laughed. "An honour which, for the moment, I forgo. And in the meantime I suggest, messieurs, that you—in your own vernacular—get on with it, whatever it is for, already my arms proceed to ache."

"Here, stow the chatter and let's get to business," struck in Crosby, who did not like the tone nor the manner of their prisoner. "You're in a very nasty predicament, young feller me lad, and don't you forget it."

"All right, Crosby, I'm bossing this show," said Bessington, sharply. "Are you armed?" he asked of the young man.

"*Ma foi,* but yes, M'sieur le Boss," was the reply. "Like you, I carry an automatic, and to save you some trouble and myself the annoyance of being searched, which to a gentleman is an abomination, I will tell you that it rests in the right-hand pocket of this coat."

Bessington strode over to the Frenchman and took the weapon from the pocket indicated. "Have you any other arms about you?" he asked.

"Monsieur, I am not an arsenal, I have no more."

"Take that coat off and let me search you," commanded Bessington abruptly, as he dropped the small

automatic into his own pocket. The young man scowled for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders.

"It is an insult to my honour, monsieur," he said. "But seeing that you are English and possibly do not know the meaning of that word, I will obey."

The jibe was well flung. Bessington flushed crimson.

"All right," he said: "I'll take your word for it that you have no other weapon."

"I thank you, monsieur. I have no other, only a pocket-knife which I surrender," and so saying he thrust his hand inside his coat and drew out a small knife, which he handed with a smile to Bessington.

"And now, messieurs, will you have the goodness to inform me as to whom I have the honour of speaking. Is it to the police, the Secret Service, the Customs officials, or merely two enterprising gentlemen out for, what you call, a lark?"

"It doesn't matter who we are," replied Bessington, curtly. "We happen to know that you are engaged in smuggling contraband over to this country, and having got wise as to when you were likely to be here again, we waited for you."

"I see. Then I must deduce for myself." He smiled at them in a friendly manner which Bessington found extremely exasperating in one who should have been grovelling with fright. "You have not, *enfin,* the brazen effrontery of the police, nor yet the finesse of the Secret Service, and neither have you the vulgar brutality of the Customs. Therefore I suppose that you are gentlemen of independent means and actions, and as such, I presume there is some

hope for me. It is true that I smuggle, it is equally true that I am caught. But since you knew of my activities, pardon me if I ask why you have not given word to your police?"

"That's our blinkin' business," struck in Crosby, who did not like the debonair manner of this young man any more than did his companion. A fellow in his precarious position, to his mind, should have been subservient and meek. He should have realized that he was at their mercy, a thing of no account, and his conversation should have been in keeping with his position. Not this light-hearted jocular tone, this air of being top-dog in a situation where in reality he was under-dog. And usually Alexander Crosby had sympathy for the under-dog, only they should realize their position as such, and then the sympathy would be deserved.

"Ah! Pardon!" said the cheery captive. "I forget that, of course, it is your blinkin' business. But, all the same, I have the honour to be intrigued. It is not usual for the English gentleman—you call him so, *n'est ce pas?* He still exist? *Ma foi,* but of course he does, for one finds him occasionally while raking among the debris of the modern world — a specimen here, and again there. Not yet extinct like the prehistoric monsters, but soon, no doubt soon, to become so. *Eh bien,* where was I? *Ah la!* I wonder, *enfin,* it is not usual for the English gentleman to do the dirty work of their police, eh? You have a reason, is it not so?"

"Certainly, it is so," replied Bessington, who was liking his prisoner's tone less and less. It put him in a false position, made him feel that—as was the fact

—he had no right to be there and had usurped the place of the lawful authorities. He would have, therefore, to make the position clear, and this was not at all to his taste.

"It is quite true that we are here for a definite reason," he said. "Had the police been here instead of us, you would simply have been marched off and charged with the offence, there would have been no two ways about it. As it is—"

"As it is, we are to effect a compromise, M'sieur le Boss, *he?*" The captive grinned most engagingly, but Colonel Bessington was not one to be influenced by any grin, engaging or otherwise.

"Compromise is hardly the right term," he said. "At least, not for one in your position to make use of."

"Ah-h, I get you, I arrive!" exclaimed the young man. "The poor prisoner who is at the mercy of one who has the distinction of being the best shot with the automatic in Europe, or, in effect, as the Americans say, the expert gunman, is hardly in a position to compromise. It is then, shall we say, on condition that he agrees to a proposal of monsieur, eh?"

"That's more like it, my lad," said Crosby.

"I understand." The young Frenchman bowed. "It is then that you have a reason other than a serving your country that you are here to meet me. In the plain English, for example, of the plain John Bull, you want something of me. I, in return, also want something of you. My liberty, *bien entendu,* of which at the moment I am deprived. Perhaps then,

we can arrive at something between us, and no bones broken, is it not?" He beamed upon them. Undoubtedly he was the happiest of the three of them, the most at his ease.

Bessington scowled, conscious of being in that false position. "Something of that sort," he admitted.

"I take it then, messieurs," went on the amiable young man, "that you two gentlemen, in arriving at a satisfactory arrangement between us, will undoubtedly—in the language of your law—be accessories after the fact. *Bien.* Therefore we shall all be in the—what you call same boat, together. We are, in fact, comrades, is it not? Let us then commence on friendly terms, I to do the honours, Messieurs, my comrades, permit me to offer you the cigarette, for there can surely be no fire without the smoke. *La, la!* That is a good joke, and I make you a present of it." He held out a gold cigarette-case as he spoke. "You have also the word of a gentleman smuggler that they are not drugged. Permit me."

Crosby grinned uncertainly and hesitated.

"French make?" he asked.

"Ah mon Dieu! Mais non! Your cooking may be execrable, monsieur, but your tobacco is not to be surpassed. Sullivan and Powell, messieurs, Hanover Square, and made specially for a sensitive palate."

"Thankee," said Crosby. "I don't mind if I do." And he helped himself. Bessington refused, uncompromisingly.

"You permit all the same, M'sieur le Boss, that I smoke myself?" asked the amiable prisoner. "I real-

ize, as you see, my position," he added with a grin, and at a curt nod from the other he lit his cigarette from Crosby's match. "A thousand thanks, monsieur, and now, in all humility, and with due respect to one who holds the gun, I suggest that we get down to bed-rock."

CHAPTER XIX

A VERY TREACHEROUS VILLAIN

A STRANGER entering the cave-like room at that moment and seeing the three men standing there, the one smiling, debonair, the other two grimly frowning, might have mistaken the first for the captor and the others for his scowling captives, and not, as it was in fact, the other way about. It would have been indeed difficult to connect the happy-looking young man with his position as captured criminal, uncertain as to his fate, liable to condign punishment.

One reason for the marked contrast in the demeanour of captive and captors was the fact that the former, though he also had just come in from a fast drive in the cold air, into the almost colder atmosphere of a damp cave, was clad in a fur-lined leather coat, and was, in consequence, feeling comparatively warm and comfortable; whereas, the other two, seated there for over half an hour in ordinary overcoats, were chilled to the bone. That alone was sufficient to make them gloomy and unhappy; the other factor was the uncertainty of the result of this interview and the fear of interruption from the inmates of Ardenmore House.

Crosby, less able to restrain his feelings than his companion, was the first to give vent to them.

"Look here," he said. "Can't we, as this fellow says, get down to bed-rock and finish the business before it finishes us. I'm stone cold in this damned cel-

lar, and we don't want to waste time, neither."

"It would be warmer, messieurs, in the upper room," suggested the captive, with a wave of the hand towards the steps. "May I suggest—"

"You have done quite enough suggesting, thanks," snapped Bessington. "Remember that I'm in command of this situation, not you. I have no intention of going into the upper room, as we might be seen by some of your men who may be on the prowl—no doubt much to be desired by you, but not by us—We'll get through our business where we are. I suppose, by the way, that it's useless to expect you to give your name?"

"*Mais oui,* but why not? I am not ashamed of my name. Antoine Dubosc it is. Allow me to present my card," and taking a leather case from his breast pocket, he extracted a card and held it out to Bessington, who took it, glanced at the name and looked up.

"And your address, Monsieur Dubosc?"

The other shook his head. "I think not, monsieur, with all due respect. At least, not at present. It is, of course, somewhere in France. Unless, *par exemple,* you propose to alter it for me to the address of one of your gaols, which I sincerely hope is not the case."

"That will depend entirely on yourself," replied Bessington. "Hand over that leather case of yours, I'll have a look at it."

The young man flushed angrily at the tone, and for a moment appeared as though he were going to refuse. But a glance at the steady hand holding the automatic, which was pointing uncomfortably at his

middle, decided him otherwise.

"There is nothing in that, monsieur, but my private papers. I ask as a favour that you leave it."

"Hand it over," snapped Bessington, and Dubosc obeyed, with a muttered oath and an evil look in his eyes.

The elder man glanced through the papers it contained and found nothing but some old letters in a woman's handwriting, but without the address for which he was looking. He did not read them and neither did he but more than glance at a photograph —also of a woman. Then he handed it back.

"This is of no use to me," he said, "but in any case I may say that I know several things about you already. I know, for instance, that you receive messages from a woman here named Betty MacIvor by carrier pigeon. That you were here some nights ago landing a cargo of silken goods which you took away in a car—this car here—having previously set upon, tied up, and drugged a friend of mine who came here by accident that night."

"Ah, milles pardons, monsieur," exclaimed the Frenchman who appeared to have recovered his good temper once more. "Was he, then, a friend of yours? That was indeed unfortunate, but what I did to him, I fear was unhappily unavoidable. I trust that the gentleman recovered from the effects of the drug, which I assure you, monsieur, was of the most harmless."

"He did, luckily for you. And he told me his experiences that night, and from certain information he gave me I gathered that you were in league with another man whose name I know well, and who was

supposed to have been killed in the War in '17. In short, I refer to one, Dominic Arden, former owner of this place and now living somewhere—so I gather —in France. Be good enough to tell me if this is so or not."

The Frenchman looked sharply at his questioner, and Crosby, watching him keenly, became suddenly aware of the fact that he himself had been relegated to the position of an onlooker—that his friend Bessington was taking matters with a very high hand—and that there might be the possibility of an ulterior motive in all this. He found himself curiously hoping that Dominic Arden *had* been killed, and that this young man knew nothing about him, or that, if he did know him, he would deny all knowledge of him. He waited eagerly for the reply and noted the ugly glitter in the Frenchman's eyes as he looked at Bessington.

"Come, come, M'sieur le Boss," exclaimed Dubosc. "What is this you ask me? Do I know someone named Dominic Arden? Be good enough to explain, if you please."

"That is quite unnecessary," snapped the other. "There is only one man who knew the secret of this tower—young Arden—and you must have learnt it from him. It's of no use attempting to fool me, so I advise you not to try. Also, it will be the worse for you. Come, Monsieur Dubosc, I'll be frank with you, tell me what you know about this man and I will see what I can do about letting you go. Deny all knowledge of him and you go with me to Locharbie police station."

"Ah, I see." A smile crossed the Frenchman's face,

an ugly smile—so Crosby thought, who watched him keenly. "You ask for information which I am to give you—if I have it, *bien entendu*—on a condition. If I have it not, or give it not—which is the same thing—you take me off to gaol?"

"That is the position," replied Bessington. "You had better decide quickly what you intend to do. Be sure that I know exactly what I shall do."

Dubosc was silent for an instant, looked at the two revolvers steadily pointing towards him, and shrugged.

"Enfin," he said, "you have me, messieurs, in a cleft stick. I have no desire to become an inmate of your hospitals, and still less a desire to see the inside of your gaols. If I tell you what I know, you permit that I go back to France? This is a bargain, is it not? You give me your word—I as a gentleman trust you. I give you my information—you as another gentleman may believe me. How about it?"

Crosby, at these words, felt a queer sense of disappointment. The young man whom he had at first thought rather a nice fellow—in spite of his calling—was, in fact, no better than any other criminal of his class; a mean, cowardly skunk, where his own personal liberty was concerned. He did know young Arden, then, and he was going to betray him to save his own skin. Crosby also began to dislike Bessington's part in the proceedings—the fact that he was making it possible for Dubosc to play this low-down game. Of course, nothing might come of it, and yet it looked as though there could be but one ending to it, and he began to wish most heartily that he had never had anything to do with it at all.

"That is the bargain, Monsieur Dubosc," replied Bessington, calmly.

"Very well, monsieur, then now I answer your question. I do know this man of whom you speak. He is my very best friend and we have been what you call pals ever since we met in a German prison camp in '17. When over a year later, we were released—that is, what was left of us—I took him, a semi-invalid through ill-treatment and starvation, to my poor home, such as it was. This monsieur, because he was too ill to be sent back to his own country. And when, a year later, he recovered, or at least was in better health, *enfin,* he begged me to let him stay, and I—I had not the heart nor yet the desire to do otherwise. For there was a reason which prevented him returning to his own country, though he has not informed me of the exact nature of that reason. There, monsieur, you have the little nutshell of facts."

"By gad!" ejaculated Crosby. "Poor beggar!" and in his eyes there was a look of utter disgust as he regarded the Frenchman.

"He was, as you say, monsieur, a poor beggar. But he is a rich one now, for he is a writer of distinction, both in his own language and mine. And as for me —" here he shrugged—"I am, what God made me, a crook, I believe you call it, but a clever one. *Mon Dieu!* I have coin money, and now I live in a large Chateau on the coast, and I engage in smuggling. I purchased a motor-boat and—I tell you, things march for me, thanks be to the good God," and here he burst into a most infectious laugh, in which Crosby joined in spite of himself. But Bessington's face was grim.

"And this man, Arden, is he also in your smuggling enterprise?"

"Ah! *Mais non.* I should say no. He does not even know what I do. One day he told me of this old tower and of the secret of the clock, and he came over and helped to show me how it worked, that was over a year ago. But he came again just lately, for hearing that his old home was to be sold once more he wished to become possessed of some pictures and books, and so I, who am clever at these things—you understand—I obtained them for him. Not, I ask you to believe, by ringing at the front-door bell and asking for them. *Non, mon brave!* I took them, as I prefer to take everything else where possible—without asking and without paying," and once more he broke into irresistible laughter in which this time Crosby did not join.

"And now, perhaps," went on Dubosc, lighting another cigarette from the stub of the old one, "since I have been so obliging as to tell you all this, you will enlighten me as to the reason for which you desire to find my friend. I have not heard him speak of knowing anyone in England. His parents, also, are dead, I believe."

"Quite true," said Bessington. "And his wife is living alone, waiting for him to return, which he dare not do seeing that, did he land in this country, he would be taken and hanged for murder. That, Monsieur Dubosc, is why your friend remains in your country, and why he says nothing to you of his past life."

For a moment there was complete silence in the gloomy vault while the young Frenchman looked at

Bessington, first with a curious smile on his face and then with a sudden frown.

"And so, monsieur, it is for this that you wish to find him, that you may drag him back to a felon's death. For this that you offer me my liberty. My God! But it would be dearly bought at such a price. And yet—" here once more he smiled—"tell me, monsieur, you have witnesses of this crime—murder, I suppose, if he is to hang. You can prove what you say?"

"The man whom you drugged that night is one of the witnesses. Two soldiers who overheard his words, admitting that he meant to kill his victim, are only waiting to be called."

"I see. And you say he has a wife?"

"Who believed him dead until a short time ago, when, having bought this place and come here to live, she is shown a bit of paper which you dropped, Monsieur Dubosc, and on which was written the date on which Dominic Arden went out to his death. Then she began to wonder."

"Ah yes. That was a bad blunder, and it seems I am to pay for it. But his wife, she loves him, I presume monsieur?"

"She thinks so, but she will cease to love a man whom she knows fears to come to her in case he should be taken and punished for his crime."

"Ah, again I see. And in all this—pardon me for the question—where do you come in, monsieur?"

"The man he murdered was my greatest friend, but that does not come into it. I want to know if he still cares for his wife, if he is ready to risk his life to go to her."

"I see, again. You are not out for blood, monsieur. And the wife, she wishes this? She perhaps would like to be free, to marry again?"

"She would like to be certain that he no longer cares for her, any woman would."

"That is so, monsieur, any woman would. Well, as I understand it, though you, monsieur, are not out for blood, it amounts almost to the same thing, did my friend return. It therefore remains, that in return for my liberty, I am to hand over my friend to justice."

"More or less, that is the situation, though the choice will rest entirely with Arden," replied Bessington. "In any case, I am but doing my duty."

"And it is the only condition on which you will give me my liberty, monsieur, that I tell you where to find my friend?" The Frenchman's lips quivered a little as he spoke, and a look of abject fear, the fear of a trapped animal, came to his eyes.

Crosby found himself hoping that he would refuse, that he would prefer gaol to the betrayal of a friend. But even as he hoped he felt it was useless.

"Absolutely the only condition," said Bessington, uncompromisingly.

"You are hard, monsieur. My liberty is everything to me. Is there nothing else that—"

"Nothing," snapped the other. "Agree to this or—you know the alternative. I have nothing more to say. Except that I will give you two minutes in which to make your choice."

He glanced at his wrist-watch.

But at this Alec Crosby broke in.

"Here, I say," he said. "That's too much of a good

thing, Bessington. You can't force a chap to betray a pal—to earn his liberty at such a price. Come now, it's not playing the game. Dammit, it's not British."

"I agree, monsieur, it is not," replied Dubosc, dryly. "It is rather—very French, eh? *tout ce qu'il y a de plus francais.* Because, as it happens, I agree, M'sieur le Boss, to your terms. I agree because my liberty is of so much value to me that I regard it more even than my honor."

"What?" exclaimed Crosby aghast. "You agree to sell a pal? To—to—to— Gosh! You make me sick."

"Shut up, Crosby, this is my affair. You are only in this to help me, not to put your oar in," said Bessington. "Then you agree?" he went on, turning to the Frenchman, who spread out his hands in an eloquent shrug.

"What choice have I, monsieur?" he asked.

"Tcha!" Crosby turned away and stared into the darkness, too disgusted for further words.

"Very good," said Bessington. "It is agreed then, that I am to see him? To ask him if he wishes to return to his wife and, if not, to conduct him myself back to England. Those are the terms, I think?"

"It is the choice of the devil or the deep sea, monsieur," replied Dubosc, with a shrug. "But since I cannot help myself, I agree."

"How, then, is it to be arrived at?" asked Bessington. "Where is he?"

"He is at my Chateau," was the reply. "And since he refuses to come to England—"

"Ah, he does refuse then?" snapped Bessington.

"Of a surety yes, *ma foi!* And I think, too, that he has good reason, M'sieur le Boss."

"You hear that, Crosby?" The colonel looked at his friend, who turned and nodded.

"Yes, I hear," he replied. "And I wish to God I didn't."

"Nonsense, man! you remember what I said to you about that?"

"Yes, yes, and I wish I hadn't listened." Bessington smiled at him, shrugged, and turned to the Frenchman.

"Well, Monsieur Dubosc. Since he refuses, what then?"

"Why, it is simplicity itself, monsieur. You will therefore have to go to him. Another case of Mahomet and the mountain." The Frenchman smiled once more. "You wish to see him to ask—so I understand—if he intends to return to his wife. And if he refuses it is then for you to act, and he falls into the hands of the British Law. If he agrees, *ma foi,* he risks doing the same thing. It is very much tails I win, heads you lose, for my poor friend, is it not? And yet I have no choice but to agree. I will therefore ask you, M'sieur le Boss, to accompany me back in my boat to my home, and there I will present you to my friend."

A queer smile crossed his face as he finished speaking and for a moment there was an ugly glint in his eyes as he regarded the man who had him in his power, and was able to force the issue.

Bessington, quick-eyed, alert, saw it. Crosby was too disgusted to see anything. He had not realized, when he had undertaken to help Bessington, that the only means of arriving at a satisfactory conclusion

concerning young Arden was by the betrayal of one friend of another for the paltry sake of his liberty. Also, he was beginning to distrust Bessington. Had he, too, shown any disgust, it would have proved at any rate that *his* motives were genuine and honourable. But it looked to Crosby as though it was a case of any means, fair or foul, in order to get hold of Dominic Arden. He wished himself heartily out of the business, and cursed himself for a fool for ever having gone into it. But at the moment he could do nothing.

"Isn't it asking rather a lot from me to trust myself alone on your boat, Monsieur Dubosc?" asked Bessington, quietly. "Better give me your address and I'll go there myself and see him."

"Ma foi! Yes, to be sure!" the other laughed. "And when you arrive you find that my friend has departed in my motor-boat which arrives there first. A state of affairs that would not be very pleasing to you, I think, or to me either, since you would but hand me over to my own police."

For the first time Bessington smiled. "You underrate my intelligence, Monsieur Dubosc," he said. "I need hardly tell you that at a word from me to a friend in the Secret Service your Chateau would be placed under observation and no one would be allowed to leave until my arrival, when you would instantly be arrested on a charge of smuggling, and your friend on the charge of murder, without even the option of returning to his wife. That only if you broke your contract with me in the way you suggest. On the other hand, if I go with you, what guarantee have I that I arrive at your Chateau at all?"

The young man flung up his head in a shout of laughter.

"Ah, but you are droll, you English. You cannot see when one pulls your legs. It is all taken *au grand serieux*. Have no fear, M'sieur le Boss, I break no contract. You give me my liberty, I take you to my friend, and you need have no fear that I shall murder you on the way. And for guarantee. Give me my card, monsieur, I write on it my address." He took the card from Bessington and scribbled on it with a pencil. "I now return it to the gentleman, your friend, who stays here," and he gave the card into Crosby's unwilling hand, and he read the address written across the back.

CHATEAU DE ST. MICHEL

BARDILLAC

ARTOIS

"If you have not returned, M'sieur le Boss, by a certain date which we will name, then monsieur, your friend, will go to your police, and they will get into communication with my police, and zut! It is I for the guillotine. And, *ma foi!* I have no use for Madame la Guillotine, I assure you, my friends."

Crosby laughed disagreeably.

"Good God! I wouldn't care to risk my neck on such a guarantee as that," he said. "A lot of good this fellow's guillotining will do you, Bessington, if you are feeding the fishes in the North Sea. You chuck the business, take my tip, chuck it. It's nasty, and I don't like it. It's a low-down game he's play-

ing, and it's damned low-down on your part to play up to him. Dirty, that's what it is—dirty."

"Hang it, Crosby, will you be silent!" exclaimed the other angrily. "It's not your affair, anyhow. If I choose to take the risk, that's my funeral."

"It's uncommonly likely it will be, too," said Crosby. "And you'll damn well deserve it," he added to himself.

"I agree," said Bessington to the Frenchman. "I'll go with you, Monsieur Dubosc."

"Very well," was the reply, and once more that queer glitter came to Dubosc's eyes. "Then, with your permission, M'sieur le Boss—for you still hold the gun and I, alas, am unarmed—I will go to the top of the tower and signal for my boat which is out at sea waiting for me. And then I take you over to my home—I show you my friend—and I give you leave, Monsieur le Briton, to take him back with you to the gallows, *bien entendu*—if you wish."

And as he said those last words he looked Bessington in the eyes, and there was an expression in his own that the elder man found impossible to fathom.

CHAPTER XX

ALEC CROSBY MAKES GOOD

"I DON'T know what it is, Marshy," said Hermione, as she and her friend were seated together in the drawing-room after dinner, and more than twenty-four hours after she had paid her visit to Betty, a visit which had been fraught with so much joy, anxiety, and subsequent fear, "but I feel as though we ought not to be sitting here doing nothing. I feel that something ought to be done, now—at once. I wish I could explain why I feel this, but I can't."

"Oh, you needn't explain, my dear," replied her friend, putting down her knitting. "I feel it myself. I've been trying to turn this horrid heel and I've had to unpick it twice, just because I can't focus my mind on it. Of course, it's this beastly uncertainty that's at the bottom of it, or else I should put it down to liver. But, honestly, there's nothing really to worry about. The Frenchman can't be here yet, not until he knows the place is safe, and he's got to see it in black and white in the papers before he'll budge. Tomorrow night at the earliest, I put it."

"I know," agreed Hermione. "Of course you must be right, but all the same I keep on feeling that you are not, and that there's something we ought to consider. I feel that we are wasting valuable time. I'm

sorry to be such a nuisance, but would you go with me to the tower? It's a little after nine and I hate to ask Frank, as he promised to go at twelve to-night, just on the chance, you know. And yet I know that he thinks it is utterly useless. He's such a dear and I hate to impose on him, Marshy."

"If you realized, my dear, that to ask him to do anything for you is to give him the greatest pleasure in his life, I think you wouldn't talk nonsense about imposing on him."

"Oh, I do realize it and I feel an absolute beast. For I know—how could any sane woman not know it?—that he is awfully fond of me."

"Yes, my dear. It's obvious, even to an old noodle like me, that the man's head over ears in love with you, and always has been. But there it is, just one of the ill chances of life, and it's no good crying over spilled milk. There, get your things on. A mile walk will do us both good. We eat far too much, and that Hibernian cook of yours, my child, is ruining my figure—if I ever had one to ruin. You slim creatures can eat what you like, and nothing seems to make you swell as it does me. It's a crime on the part of Nature that makes one female run to fat unless she starves, and another remain thin if she eats ten meals a day with potatoes at each of them. However, there it is, and one has to grin and bear it."

Very soon, and in spite of all Frank Daneham could say to dissuade them, the two set out on their walk to the tower, reached it, found it as usual unoccupied and the sea devoid of any kind of vessel.

"Never mind, I'm glad we came if only to put my mind at rest," said Hermione. "And while we *are* here, let's see once more if we can discover what it was Dominic found out about the clock."

Whereupon she again made a careful examination of the mechanism, turning the hands to this figure and that, and finally leaving them in the state in which Richard Bessington had found them an hour later.

The two women returned home, relieved in their minds, it is true, but Hermione bitterly indignant with herself that she could not discover the secret of the clock.

"I shall probably find it out when it's too late," she said dejectedly, "and I feel that such a lot depends on it."

"Child, don't be so optimistic," said her friend, dryly. "You'll make me feel quite cheerful before you've done, and that would be a big mistake. As a matter of fact you ought to get to bed early after all this worry and excitement. You'll be worn out, my dear."

"I don't budge until Frank comes back from his walk to-night," said Hermione, with great decision.

But Frank Daneham did not go for a walk that night, for, as he was on the point of leaving the drawing-room to go into the hall for his coat and hat, there came a sharp tap on the windows, the thick curtains of which were not drawn, and through whose red blinds the glow of the lamp could be seen by anyone outside.

"What's that?" Hermione was on her feet, and running to the door, called Frank, sharply. "Do come here," she cried. "There's someone outside, rapping on the window. There! do you hear? there it is again."

For once more came the sharp tap, tap, repeated more violently than before, and Frank Daneham strode to the window, drew back the blind and opened it.

"What is it? Who is there?"

"It's me, Alec Crosby, from the Glen. Can I come in and speak to you? I saw your light and didn't want to make a disturbance by ringing the ball."

"Go round to the door and I'll let you in," said Daneham, quickly, and in another minute he and the two women were running down the passage to the front door which was soon opened and Crosby, hot, dishevelled, and in a violent state of excitement came in.

"How on earth—" began Daneham, but the newcomer interrupted him.

"Never mind yet how I came here. I've got to tell you something. I've—I've—been a low-down blackguard and I've got to make good. Can you give me something to drink? My throat's dry with running. I've run all the way from the tower here."

"The tower?" cried Hermione, and went white to the lips.

Daneham ran into the dining-room, poured out a whisky-and-soda and brought it quickly back to the panting and exhausted man, who gulped it down gratefully.

"Thank you, now I can talk. It's about that feller Bessington. Fact is he—well, he found out the secret of that infernal clock when he was over there the other day—"

"Good God!" exclaimed Frank. "The lying skunk. He said he had discovered nothing. Are you sure of this, Crosby?"

"Yes," replied the other, while Hermione stared in silent amazement and fear, fear of what she should hear next. "Sure thing he found it, and more than that, he saw the old woman loose off a carrier pigeon —when he was on his way back that was—and he twigged, or rather I did, that the Frenchman would probably be staying where the pigeon flew to with the message, would then wire his boat and try and get away by the tower to-night."

"Oh!" cried Hermione, desperately. "That's what we ought to have thought of. But how do you know all this, Mr. Crosby?"

"Never mind that now," said Daneham. "Did the Frenchman come, Crosby?"

"He did," was the grim reply. "You see, we had motored over here, parked our car in the wood, and walked to the tower, where we stayed waiting for him in the lower room."

"What lower room, my good man?" demanded Iza. "Remember you are talking in riddles to us. We didn't know you were in this thing at all."

"I was helping Bessington, damn him," was the reply. "But I'll tell you as clearly as I can. There's a room under the clock room, where the Frenchy park-

ed his car; you get to it by wading through the river and through that tunnel—"

"By Jove! Where we were the other day!" cried Frank.

"You couldn't have guessed," said Crosby. "Bessington only discovered it by finding out that the clock was a combination safe door, which you set by a date, and which I'll explain later. The date was actually set for Monday, December the third, nineteen-seventeen."

"Ah!" a cry from Hermione, and she clutched her friend by the arm.

"Steady, child," said Iza. "Don't faint, my dear, there may be a lot for us to do yet."

"Go on, man, what happened?" asked Daneham. "But first of all, tell me how you come to know all this and to be here, it will make it easier to understand."

"Well, that's simple enough. Bessington told me all about young Arden, you know, and the possibility of his being alive, and then when this smuggling stunt came along, he connected Arden with it. Told me he wanted to see the young man to find out why he kept away, and asked me to help him. It sounded all right and I agreed, just for the fun of the smuggler hunt. Didn't think any harm of Bessington until—well—until it was too late, you see."

"I think I see." Daneham's face was stern. "Well, tell us what happened."

"What happened was this—" And then Alec Crosby proceeded in a graphic manner—interspersed with many forcible ejaculations regarding his own folly

in ever having been mixed up in the dirty business—to describe the events which had followed their arrival at the tower. And his hearers stood listening with bated breath, Hermione clutching her friend's hand tightly in her own, fear and horror depicted on her drawn face as she realized only too clearly what it all meant, and would mean, to Dominic Arden.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Daneham, when Crosby paused, breathless for a moment. "It's difficult to believe that Bessington could have descended to such a thing as this, or that the Frenchman—who struck me, in spite of what he did to me, as rather a nice fellow—could turn out such a contemptible blackguard."

"I refuse to believe it possible," said Iza Marsh, emphatically, though more to try and reassure Hermione than through any real conviction on her part. "I believe there's something more than meets the eye here."

"I'm afraid not," said Crosby, bitterly. "Bessington took me in and the Frenchy took you in, Daneham. I don't set up for being a saint myself, but, hang it all! There's a limit to a fellow's villainy."

"But could you do nothing at all?" cried Hermione, piteously.

"Do? What could I do?" he returned. "I could only stand there and listen to 'em. I did warn Bessington that he risked his life by going with the fellow on his boat, but he laughed at me. He knew he was safe enough, and he knew he'd got me, too. Knew I couldn't go to the police and tell 'em about

it, because they'd nab me as an accessory in letting the fellow escape. He didn't think I'd come and split to you, though, and as soon as I saw the blackguards well away in their damned boat—pardon, ladies—I ran hell for leather down to you. I didn't know my way, of course, but I guessed the path I found would lead to this house. Here's the blighter's card with his address," he added, taking it from his note-case and handing it to Daneham, who glanced at it and nodded.

"I wonder if it would be better to hand this over to the police and let them go after the man themselves," he said.

"My dear Frank!" struck in Iza, vehemently. "You can't do that, unless you want to give Mr. Arden away. That's where they've got us, don't you see?"

"Of course I see," was the frowning reply. "Well, thank you, Crosby, for what you've done. Is there anything more that you have to tell us?"

"Only one thing, and that is, that if you get off in the car early to-morrow, you'll catch the express at Wick in the morning, be in London next morning, and then get over to France. They'll not get to the Chateau in less than forty hours, going at top speed all the way, and if all goes well, you should get there almost as soon as they do in their damned motor-boat. At any rate you'll be able to help the lad, and that's all I can say at the moment. I'm sick and sorry, but I believed in Bessington. 'Pon my honour I did."

Daneham's answer was to hold out his hand.

"That's all right, man. You've made good, and how the devil could you have guessed? But what strikes me in all this is, not that young Arden is in any danger, but that Bessington is asking to be thrown overboard."

"Don't you believe it," was the reply. "That damned French scoundrel is all out for his own skin. You just get off as soon as you can if you don't want young Arden to be dragged back and hanged. You can fight duels in France, you know. All you have to do is to call that fellow out and kill him; the Frenchy, too, if necessary, though I don't think that will be, for he's probably playing a deep game if we only knew it. Anyhow, what do you say about it?"

"There is nothing to be said, except that I, for one, am going," said Hermione in a steady voice. "Frank, you will come?"

"My dear girl, what a question," was his only reply.

"And you certainly don't go without me, my dear," said Iza Marsh, brusquely.

"Yes, we'll all go," said Daneham. "Crosby, keep your mouth shut about all this—but, of course, I needn't say that, I know."

"Don't you worry, old man. I'll get right off to London and lie low. You know my address, look me up if and when you get back. And don't worry about Mackay here. Bessington told me that he'd sent him a note saying he thought there was nothing in the affair and not to expect him for a bit, as he was going away or something. Anyhow, they won't bother you.

'And don't you worry, either, Mrs. Rodenberg. That young feller-me-lad will be all right, you'll see."

Hermione held out her hand impulsively.

"May I thank you, Mr. Crosby, for what you have done?" she said.

"If you'll forgive me, that's all I ask," was the gruff reply.

CHAPTER XXI

THE REASON WHY

THE Chateau de St. Michel came into sight long before the sturdy and swift-racing motor-boat drew up alongside the private landing-stage. It was a modern structure, built after the style of an old French castle, with its many towers and turrets, standing about fifty yards from the cliff edge down whose precipitous face a winding path had been cut leading to the landing-stage.

Richard Bessington and his erstwhile prisoner and present host were standing on the upper deck watching the ever-nearing coastline. It was late afternoon and some forty hours since they had left the Scottish shore and set out upon their journey. Bessington had found Antoine Dubosc a most congenial host and companion, and the hours which must inevitably have dragged in less pleasing company, had passed quickly and enjoyably enough. The young man had treated his rather saturnine guest to a frank and completely unvarnished history of this far from blameless life, never, however, mentioning the name of Dominic Arden once during the whole of the narrative.

"And here," he said, gaily pointing with a wave of the hand to the nearing scene before them, "is my home, the ancient citadel of the Duboscs, who were

grand seigneurs of the land when the Britons still dressed themselves in woad, and which was—in short, *mon ami*—built according to my instructions about two years ago, and occupied by one Antoine Dubosc, who adopted the name on entering into his domain of St. Michel, and who is happy in the possession of a mistress—I mean *chatelaine, bien entendu,* who adores him and who will greet him on his arrival shortly. *Non,* M'sieur le Boss, I have never entangled myself with a wife. My trade—if I may dishonour such a calling by such a bourgeois title—is too full of risks to permit of the harrowing of wifely feelings and affections, and the making of unnecessary widows. Besides, we are too fond of each other to wish to, or to make it necessary to marry. It is human nature to resent interference with one's liberty. Tie the knot of matrimony and, hey presto! you at once create a sensation of restraint, and with it comes, of necessity, the desire for freedom. That is why there are so many divorces to read about in the papers. Why—*Mon Dieu!* I ask you, why will people marry? Tell me that, monsieur."

"Ask me something simpler, Monsieur Dubosc," was the reply. "I refuse to be drawn into any such complex argument. Tell me," he went on, "how do you manage about the Customs? The authorities must know that you have this boat and this landing-stage. Is there no difficulty?"

"None whatever, monsieur. When I leave here I leave as the *grand seigneur* in his pleasure-boat in broad daylight. But I call at certain lonely spots of which I have knowledge and then my small boat goes

forth and returns heavier than she started. If this continues at intervals throughout the night, it is surely easy to suppose that by morning I may continue on my pleasure trip with my hold stored full of merchandise, and no one the wiser. It is simple, though one has, it is understood, to know the ropes and take precautions. And yet, for one who is careful and also lucky, it is always simple. Indeed, my dear Leonie she has said very often: 'It is surely too simple, my Antoine, one day you will be caught.' And *helas!* she is right, for one day I am caught, and you, M'sieur le Boss, have the honour to be the one who catches. Ah! Life, it is very funny sometimes, but it is also very pleasant when it is as easy to make a bargain with the one who catches as I, monsieur, have made with you.

"But come. We have arrived and we will now ascend to my chateau. And as my word is my bond, as you have seen, I have given orders that this boat shall remain here for the departure of M'sieur le Boss with his companion whom he is to conduct either to Madame his wife or Monsieur the hangman as soon as possible. And if the latter, how very grateful should your Government be that you avoid for them the tedium and expense of extradition. *Voila,* monsieur. Allow me to welcome you to France, the home of those who do things that are considered not British."

And, with a low bow, he sprang on to the jetty, swept off his felt hat and stood with a hand held out, offering assistance to Bessington, who followed.

A moment later they were climbing the steep path up the cliff's side, on the outer edge of which was a

stout iron railing, and five minutes more brought them to the top where in front of them was a formal garden, consisting of terraces of flower-beds and a path which led to the chateau itself.

In silence they traversed the fifty yards, Bessington finding speech difficult and not quite sure as to how he was meant to take Dubosc's last words, which sounded to him like a jibe of contempt. And yet the man had been willing enough to sacrifice his friend on the altar of his own liberty, and that was surely far more worthy of contempt than what he, Bessington, was doing—namely—his duty in taking a criminal back to justice, or a husband to his wife. Better, however, to say nothing and leave the matter alone. He did not pretend to understand Antoine Dubosc, and people and things that he did not understand were usually left severely alone.

They arrived at length at the chateau. The bell was rung and a manservant opened the door. He glanced inquiringly at the stranger for a moment and then turned a beaming countenance on his master.

"Madame, she is in? Or has she gone out?" asked Dubosc, as he motioned his guest inside and followed.

"Madame is in the library with monsieur," was the reply. "She was not expecting you so soon."

"*Non, mon vieux,* and neither was I. I am even a surprise to myself. But, *enfin,* I am here and that, I think, is all that matters. Come, M'sieur le Boss, a word in your ear." He drew Bessington aside while the servant disappeared through a door at the end of the large entrance hall. "We shall enter the library noiselessly, so as not to disturb them, for they are at

work, Leonie and my friend. And I wish you to see him before you speak, after which I leave the rest to your British chivalry. Come."

So saying, he led the way across the hall and paused at a door, turned the handle noiselessly and, opening it gently, motioned with his hand to Bessington to stand near the aperture while he himself stood aside.

Bessington, greatly wondering at all this, obeyed, even suspecting a trap or a hoax that was being played on him but never for one instant guessing the truth.

Then he looked into the room.

At a desk, her head bent, her hand busy with a pen, sat a woman whose face he could not see, while in the centre of the room, which was strangly bare of furniture, a tall slim man was standing, pausing for a moment in his pacing to and fro, and which a second later he began again.

Bessington recognized that tall slim figure, the dark hair, strangely grey about the temples, the thin ascetic face and nervous hands of Dominic Arden, but a Dominic Arden nine years older than when he had last seen him, and with lines of suffering and time upon his face that belonged rather to a man of fifty than to a youth of twenty-nine. Also, there was another difference which at first the looker-on could not explain or fathom. He was speaking in fluent French, evidently dictating to the woman at the desk, while his nervous hands moved convulsively every now and then, and though his eyes stared straight into Bessington's own, yet he gave no sign of recognition, or fear, or any emotion whatsoever. He came slowly

nearer, pausing only a yard away, then turned and retraced his steps, stopped again and suddenly flung out a hand.

"Oh, this is abominable," he cried, still in French. "I am indeed a selfish brute. You have sat there for an hour while I—I have been pouring out my soul, forgetting that your poor hand must be dead with cramp, and otherwise behaving like the mere male creature that I am. Stop, Leonie, my angel, and kick me round the room as I deserve."

"Foolish one," replied the woman, raising her head and exhibiting to the watching and now completely-puzzled Bessington a face of singular attraction, without in any way being beautiful. For there was not a feature that was exactly right. The nose was too short, the mouth too large, the shape of the face too wide, the colour too pale; but in the eyes, deep with a wonderful compassion, there was beauty, and as they looked at the distress in the good-looking face of the man, that expression of pity, of compassion, deepened.

"Silly boy that you are," she said, her tones low and rather husky. "As if I tire ever when seeing you happy. Do I not know that this is the one bright spot of light in your poor darkened life? And would I not work my hands to the bone to see happiness come to you as you weave your wonderful stories and forget your own troubles in the weaving? *Alons, cheri,* enough of this about me. March, my friend, march. Are we not in the very middle of the *denouement* when the wife returns and will soon be in her husband's arms? For such a state of things to happen we must not pause an instant. Now, I am ready once more."

But the young man did not commence with his dictation at once. Instead, he walked slowly and rather unsteadily towards where she sat, stretching out his hands, feeling first the desk, then her hand; finally one of his own rested on her head in a mute caress.

"God bless you, Leonie," he said, huskily. And at that Bessington felt the Frenchman's hand on his arm and found himself gently, but firmly, impelled backwards into the hall. Then the door was silently closed and Dubosc spoke.

"*Enfin, mon brave,* you have seen? You are satisfied now that he had reason in staying here? And I suppose that you, as a kind-hearted Briton, are still ready to conduct my friend to the hangman?"

"Good God! The man's blind!" said Bessington hoarsely.

"Yes, M'sieur le Boss, he is, as you say, blind; has, in effect, been blind for nearly seven years. That, you understand, is the reason why he has never returned to his own country to seek his wife. Not only because he could not do so alone and was afraid of what might happen to him, but also because he preferred that the woman he loved should rather believe him dead than feel herself tied to a helpless creature like himself. That, monsieur, in effect, is why he has not been brave enough to deliver himself to your hangman—because, you see, we who loved him did not—strange as it may seem to you—we did not offer our help in that direction, and without it he could not go. For a blind man is a very helpless man, monsieur. A heinous offence, no doubt, on our

part, seeing that it is one's duty to help in bringing the wrongdoer to justice. But I and my Leonie have no shame in what we have done and, *nom de Dieu!* I do not think it is because the Almighty is not British that He will not pardon us."

"Be silent, please," exclaimed Bessington, goaded at last beyond endurance at the other's gibing voice, which now he could understand and, in seeing the justice of which, feel the greater irritation. "Tell me about this. How did he lose his sight? When? Where?"

"He lost it, my friend, in the prison camp of our one time enemies. Never mind how—I will not go into that, since it is over and we are at peace again, and recriminations—as you have it in your vernacular—get us nowhere. Also, there are some things it is better not to know; one sleeps the easier for not knowing them. Enough that his sight is gone, never to return. For, believe me, we have taken him to the very greatest specialists, and all give but the one opinion. For me, if I had been in his place, I should have ended it long ago—for to lose one's sight is to lose everything. And it does not make it any better to know that he is only one among hundreds of young men who lost theirs in the War. But he is brave, that one, and my Leonie, bless her heart, she helps him to be brave, and lightens his dark hours, which, believe me, monsieur, number twenty-three out of twenty-four."

"But he should be happy with such good friends?" protested Bessington, who had not yet adjusted his mind to this new and altogether complicated state of affairs.

"Happy? *Mais non,* is he not for ever thinking of the wife he has lost? Of the wife who, for all he knows, has forgotten him? Do you think we read to him the account of her marriage? But give us credit for some little feeling, monsieur. Of course, we did not. So that he knows nothing of her, not even of where she lives, or if she is married again or even dead."

"But did you not know that she had bought Ardenmore? Surely that would convey something to you of her feelings towards him?"

"No, I did not know. I saw nothing of it in the papers except one paragraph in which it was stated that Ardenmore was once again to change hands and was to be bought by a person of great wealth. It was then that he insisted that I take him across in my boat, I who already had gone so many times to the tower, the secret of which he had told me long ago. It was I who stole the pictures and books for him because—the poor thing—he could not see to steal them for himself."

"And he knows nothing about what you are doing, what use you are making of the secret he told you?"

"Nothing. But nothing at all. Why, *mon Dieu,* if he thinks me an honourable fellow, should I make him unhappy by telling him that I am not? There would be no sense in it. For he is not likely to discover it for himself. So I take a leaf from your book of wise sayings, and I repeat to myself—'Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.' Wisdom, my friend, does not always make for happiness."

"I see." Bessington spoke slowly, his eyes fixed on vacancy. "I see," he repeated again.

"And now what is to happen?" demanded Antoine Dubosc, regarding his companion out of suddenly narrowed eyelids.

Richard Bessington was silent for a moment. This, of course, explained why the Frenchman had been so ready to take him to see young Arden; he was sure of what would be the result engendered by compassion for a blind man. What would be his action should this result not be forthcoming and Bessington insist on taking his friend back to England? Would he stand by his bargain? Or would things become nasty and dangerous for Richard Bessington? For the moment it was obvious that he must temporize, play for time in which to think.

"You will, of course, give me time in which to consider this matter?" he said at last. Dubosc raised his eyebrows.

"To consider?" he repeated. "But is there, then, anything to consider? Is it possible to suppose that I should have taken you to see my friend if I had not thought that, having seen him, you would be satisfied that there was only one thing left to do, and that to go home—alone?"

And then doubt came to Bessington as to whether he had been wise in trusting himself alone there. Whatever he chose to do, could he trust this man? If his word of honour did not bind him, was that guarantee in the shape of Crosby, who was to go to the police in four days' time should Bessington not return, of sufficiently deterring effect as to hold the Frenchman's hand if he thought fit to raise it against him? He looked quickly into the dark face, fear and

doubt in his own eyes, and the steely-eyed crook was quick to see and to understand, and he suddenly laughed.

"Ah, you mistrust me," he said. "You doubt the word of a thief and a smuggler. But you need have no fear. When I agreed to bring you here it was in exchange for my liberty. Had I not brought you I should now have been in gaol. It is for you and my friend to decide between you, that was our bargain, and a bargain is still a bargain, monsieur, even if made between an English gentleman and a French crook. If I am disappointed in you, that is my affair, but it is not, *mon Dieu,* a reason for—murder. Come, monsieur, I await your answer. What do you mean to do? My boat is waiting; my men, who are also my comrades, are awaiting my orders. I cannot ask them to wait forever."

"I know. And yet this is a matter which requires consideration," repeated Bessington. Which was true, for the fact of Dominic Arden's helpless state did alter things considerably. It made it certain that did Hermione hear of it she would be lost to him—Bessington — forever — a thing impossible to contemplate. As for his idea of taking this man back to justice, there would be no justice. There would, instead, be a lot of sickly sentiment towards a blind man, and he would probably get off scot free, if, indeed, he was ever tried, which was doubtful indeed. If he took him back to England, he would be taking him straight into the arms of his wife and ruining his own chances of happiness. And if he left him here, Hermione might in some way discover the truth. He could not leave him here, for Crosby

knew the address, and Crosby, with his sickly ideas, might be very dangerous.

And here was where this blindness might be of immense help. There were possibilities—the possibility of a false step made by the blind man on board the motor-boat. A stifled cry in the night, a splash, and, later, an entirely plausible story to Hermione, either of a search for Dominic Arden and a failure to find any such person alive; or that sooner than return to her he had, through fear of what should happen to him, gone off somewhere, no one knew where. Nothing could ever be proved, whichever course he chose to adopt. The Frenchman for his own sake dare not expose him, and he did not credit him with any fine feelings of self-sacrifice for the sake of Dominic Arden.

Also, and this had seriously to be considered now —there was the possibility of eliminating the Frenchman—who might prove troublesome—from the picture altogether. He could provoke a quarrel, from which would ensue a duel, and who had ever stood up against Richard Bessington's marksmanship and come off best yet? Yes, certainly things were shaping, only it would take thinking out. He must go warily.

"Well, M'sieur le Boss." The Frenchman's voice brought him back to realities with a start. "You have made up your mind?"

"I must see the man himself first, before I can say anything," he replied. "I told you that my actions would be guided more or less by his own decision."

"That is true," replied Dubosc, that queer glitter in his usually laughing eyes. "Have you any doubt as to what he will decide? Though, indeed, he may even

decide that it would be preferable to return in the custody of police officers than with you, monsieur."

"You mean that if I saw fit to take him and he refused to accompany me, it would be a matter for extradition?"

"That, more or less, is what I mean," was the reply. "At least, it will do," and Bessington failed to hear the irony in the tone.

"And I take it that you will not oppose me whatever happens? Whatever I consider it my duty to do?"

"Monsieur, I do not want your fat friend to put the police on my track, that is understood," was the reply. "Rest assured that I will not oppose you in any way. What you do, you do. And what my friend decides, he decides; I am ready to fall in, you call it, with your plans. That is understood."

"Very well, then, if you will bring Mr. Arden here I will see him.

Antoine Dubosc strode towards the library without another word.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BEGINNING OF A JOURNEY

FOR a quarter of an hour Richard Bessington paced the hall alone, glad of the interval of quiet in which he could think out his future plan of action. And after much hard thinking the one dominant decision he arrived at was that on no account whatever must Dominic Arden be allowed to remain here, nor, when once on the way home, must he be permitted to land.

During that voyage, therefore, something had got to happen. But as the voyage would take practically forty-eight hours to accomplish, there was ample time in which to arrange what that happening should be. The immediate present was his great concern. He had stipulated with Dubosc that Arden should be given his choice of returning to his wife or being dealt with by himself. Either course must be, in the Frenchman's mind, equally dangerous, for *he* would not take into consideration the probable immunity of the young man on account of his blindness.

What would happen, therefore, if he, Bessington, insisted on the agreement being carried out—as he must should Arden refuse to go back to his wife, which he undoubtedly would, since he had done so for seven years, and now that his presence was dis-

covered and action likely to be taken, had even greater reason for doing.

Dubosc, up to now, had seemed reasonable. But reasonable or not, Dubosc, in any case, was in the way. Dubosc, therefore, must be got out of the way. If, by any means, he could be induced to accompany his friend on the boat, there would be a very easy way of getting rid of him, and by the simple means of provoking a duel, and not even his own comrades on the boat would associate an honourable duel with murder.

If, on the other hand, Dubosc suggested going himself, so much the better, and if he contemplated anything in the nature of foul play, he, Bessington, would have got his own stunt into action long before the other could do anything.

This, then, was the decision he had arrived at when at length the library door opened and the two men came in.

No doubt something, if not all, of the truth had been explained to Arden and to the woman Leonie, for Antoine Dubosc looked oddly excited, in strange and vivid contrast to the other, whose arm he held and whose white face showed a deadly calm. But not even the sight of this helpless creature caused a momentary twinge of pity from the stern, vindictive avenger, for the glaring fact that this same helpless creature stood between himself and happiness, between himself and nine long years of unrequited and hopeless passion, killed all thoughts of pity. Pity! Faugh! It was unthinkable that anything so sickly should possess him for a moment.

"Permit me," said Dubosc, as the two came slowly

towards Bessington, "to make you known to one another. Colonel Bessington—my friend Mr. Arden. I have, it is understood, already made the facts known to my friend. It is, therefore, for you two to arrange matters between you. Allow me to observe, though"—here he glanced at his watch—"that the sooner you arrive at a complete understanding, the better. Here is a chair, *mon ami,* sit down."

"Thanks, old man," said Dominic, his voice very quiet and steady. "I'd sooner stand, but I'd like you to stay—if you don't mind."

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed the other. "I had no intention of going." And seating himself in a comfortable arm-chair, he stretched out his legs and proceeded to light a cigarette.

"The matter should be quite easily settled," observed Bessington, with a quick and rather uneasy glance at the seated figure. He could have very well done without his presence, but wisely made no protest.

"Quite easily," agreed Dominic, his sightless eyes turned in Bessington's direction, and so uncannily fixed upon the other's face that the elder man felt it almost impossible to believe that Arden could not see him.

"You understand why I am here, Arden?" he asked sternly.

"My friend has explained the situation fully, sir," was the reply. "And as there could have been no question in your mind as to my voluntary return to my own country, either to my wife or to anyone, there is only one reason for your presence here."

"I suppose you understand that if you agree to go

to your wife, I will take no further action against you," went on Bessington, who could afford to fulfil his bargain to the letter knowing well what would be the result.

"Thanks," replied the young man, with a laugh full of bitterness. "You know as well as I do that I can't return to my own country again, and that I would rather die than ask my wife to share my exile. I have kept away from her all these years in order to spare her the hell of being involved in my troubles and also of being tied for her life to a blind man. There is no reason why I should alter my decision and I have no intention of doing so."

"Very well. Monsieur Dubosc, you hear this?"

"I am not deaf, M'sieur le Boss. I hear well enough, and I am glad that we are both honourable men. *Allons, continuez, mon brave.*" The Frenchman lay back in his chair and half-closed his eyes.

"As you have refused the conditions offered you," proceeded Bessington, turning again to Dominic, "I have no choice but to ask you to accompany me back to England where you will have to stand your trial on a charge of murder. The murder of my great friend and superior officer, Colonel Grimshawe, on the evening of the third of December, nineteen-seventeen."

"Very well," the steady voice had not a quiver in it, the steady eyes remained fixed.

"And do you deny or admit the charge?"

"Come, come," here interposed Dubosc quickly. "That is not a question for you to ask, my friend. It is out of your province altogether. Admit nothing, Dominic, my son."

"Why not?" he asked. "I can't deny it, I don't deny it. I killed him, and I meant to. There is nothing more to be said."

"*Sacre milles tonnerres!* But there is," exclaimed the other. "You may have knocked him down, but that is not to say that you meant to kill him. There is no proof of that, *mordieu!*"

"Unfortunately there is," interposed Bessington, quietly. "Two soldiers in the next room heard Arden say that he meant to kill him."

"It's true that I said that," admitted Dominic, calmly. "After what he said I had no intention of allowing him to say anything again, therefore I killed him."

Dubosc laughed harshly. "You drive nails into a coffin, my friend," he said with a glance at Bessington. "We'll, have it your own way. If you wish to hang, you must hang."

"Do you not think it would be better if you left us to do the talking, Monsieur Dubosc?" inquired Bessington, coldly.

"You may think so, certainly, which does not mean that I do."

"Better let it alone, old man," said Dominic. "I'd rather you did. After all, there's really nothing to be said, so what's the use of saying anything?"

"All right, as you will," replied the Frenchman.

"Having admitted so much, then I suppose you have no objection to accompanying me back to England?" asked Bessington, turning once more to Dominic.

"I would prefer to stay and await extradition," was the quiet reply.

"Why so? It would make no difference and be far worse and more unpleasant for you. For then I should have to make a charge to the police here and you would be kept in custody over here until the formalities were through."

"I should prefer it, sir," repeated Dominic. There was a strange dignity about him that impressed even Bessington. Dubosc was not looking at him, he appeared to be absorbed in the process of blowing rings into the still air.

"I'm afraid I can't agree to that," said Bessington. "I prefer to take you back myself, and since you neither deny the charge, nor offer any objection to being taken back, I consider that I have fulfilled my contract made to you, Monsieur Dubosc, and that the matter is, in short ended."

"It certainly seems so," replied the Frenchman, still blowing rings.

"Have you anything to say to that?" asked Bessington, again turning to Dominic. The young man shrugged slightly.

"Except that I would prefer to be taken back by the police, I have nothing to say," was the quiet reply.

"But, *mon cher,*" here interposed Dubosc. "That is surely unreasonable. Of course, it is true that everyone has his own taste, but for myself I am not so enamoured with the police. If you must go, then at least go in comfort, which you would not do if in the charge of two of your police. Also, it would mean

that our own police would pay me a visit here, and they are the last visitors that I desire, *bien entendu.* But, of course, you please yourself. I have no wish to interfere."

Dominic was silent for a moment.

"Yes," he said at last. "I hadn't thought of that. After what you told me about that wretched smuggling business, of course they can't come here. Good God! If I'd only known! But I'm not blaming you, old man, or in any way for what has happened now. I am to blame in ever having given away that secret. But it's done now, and it's of no use kicking."

"Then if that is so," observed Bessington, "I take it that you will consider yourself in my charge from now."

"Very well," replied Dominic. "I'm afraid I must, and after all, the sooner it's over the better."

Bessington regarded the calm impassive face for a moment, and then he walked a few steps towards him.

"I suppose you fully understand the situation," he said. "I mean that it will not be a question of the boat returning to Scotland, but to some other port in the south of England."

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Dominic, indifferently.

"That being the case," proceeded the other, "have you no desire to ask any questions? Your wife, for instance?"

But at that the hot blood suddenly surged into the young man's pale face, and it was easy to understand

how the now dull eyes could have glittered and blazed had there been a spark of life left in them.

"Be silent," he said, harshly. "And be good enough not to touch on my private affairs. Get on with your duty, if that's what you call it, but anything else is outside your province. I discuss my affairs only with my friends, not with my gaoler."

"Ah! *Mon Dieu!* such heat!" exclaimed Dubosc, suddenly springing out of his chair and laying a hand on Dominic's shaking shoulder. "And for what, *mon ami?* Say but the word and this Colonel Bessington walks out of my house and into my boat for a lonely passage home, and to hell with my honour, if it becomes necessary. You do not think that I am willing for you to go, do you? And that if it was not for this, my word of honour, which I gave him in exchange for liberty, that I would let him take you, eh?

"You would have no choice, old man," was the reply. "It's not likely I would let you suffer after—after all you have done for me. Why, good God, man! Do you think I'd mind dying if it wasn't for leaving you and Leonie? That's my only hell, now."

There was a look of such inexpressible misery on his drawn face as he groped desperately for his friend's hands that even Bessington turned away. And it was then that Dubosc seized the groping hands and whispered hurriedly:

"Courage, *mon brave,* trust me, all will be well," and then, seeing the look of puzzlement on the other's face, he turned abruptly to Bessington.

"Monsieur le Colonel," he said, "you will, I suppose, have no objection to my saying a few words to my friend in private?"

"On the contrary," was the reply. "I have every objection. Mr. Arden is now in my custody, and if I were an officer of police I should not leave his side for one moment. It would, after all, have been simpler for me to have handed him over to the police. But as it would undoubtedly inconvenience you, Monsieur Dubosc, to have those gentleman in your house, and you have persuaded your friend to go with me, I must ask you in common courtesy to respect my position as lawful custodian of this man. Anything that you and he or anyone else have to say will be said in my hearing."

"*Bien,* monsieur, I see your point, and I commend your astuteness that will make capital out of my unfortunate position, with regards to my own police," here he laughed. "As for what I would say to my friend it is this, and M'sieur le Boss is welcome to hear it. Be brave, *mon enfant,* and have courage. Things may not be so black as they seem. And for your journey, I at least will be there to see that you have comfort, for, always with the permission of Monsieur le Colonel, I propose to accompany you."

"You please yourself about that," replied Bessington. "Personally, I am very glad that you are coming." Which was perfectly true.

"And God knows I shall be grateful for you, old man," said Dominic. "I suppose," he went on to Bessington, "you will have no objection to my saying good-bye to Madame?"

"None whatever, provided it is also in my presence."

"Bien," said Dubosc, with a grin. "You are indeed wise, monsieur, to take no risks. I will go and fetch her."

He left the hall abruptly, and as the library door closed behind him Bessington turned and watched his prisoner as he stood in the centre of the large bare apartment, motionless, and apparently absorbed in his own thoughts. And as he considered his absolute helplessness, he reflected that it would be an easy matter for that "something" to happen on board the boat before the English shores were reached. A blind man is easy prey for anyone.

There came a sudden movement from Dominic, a quick upward turn of the head.

"Are you still there, Colonel Bessington?" he asked.

"Yes, of course I am here."

"I suppose it is useless to ask you to let me see Leonie alone? I am unarmed, so I can't shoot myself but of course you can search me if you don't believe that."

"I believe you all right," was the reply, "but I'm afraid I can't possibly do as you ask, in the circumstances."

Dominic's reply was drowned in the sudden bursting open of the library door, admitting a whirlwind in the shape of Leonie who swept across the hall and flung her arms round his neck.

"Ah, *mon Dieu!* That ever I should live to see this day," she cried, passionately. "I thought when

Antoine told me about this thing that you would arrive at an understanding, or for sure I should have been here before to see to it. They shall not take you away, my little one, no, they shall not! It is I, Leonie, who says it." Here she turned angrily to Bessington. "Who are you, *ma foi!* that you come here with your talk of duty. *Mon Dieu!* It is not duty, it is a crime that you do, a crime that even your *sacre* Government will not countenance." Here her voice rose to a scream and she shook her fist in his face. "You think to hang him and so to be rid of him, but you will not and so I tell you, I who love him and who know that he is no criminal, but a brave and honourable man who would not listen to one who told a lie about his wife, but who very rightly killed him who slandered and dishonoured her name. And for that he is to be hanged! Ah no. *Ma foi,* no! And a thousand times no. Antoine, he is a coward and a fool. If he was a man he would kill you. But he is afraid for his own life, and I—I have not the strength or it is with these hands that I—" but here a sob choked her, and Dominic, who in vain had tried to interrupt her, at last broke in.

"Don't, Leonie, *cherie.* For God's sake leave it alone, you only make it worse for me. Say good-bye, dear, and let me go. I want to thank you for what you have done and yet I can't, there are no words—" but here she in her turn stopped him.

"No!" she cried. "I will not listen. There are no thanks between you and me. If it was not that I feel things will go well with you in the end, be sure that that man there—whatever Antoine says—

should not take you. As it is I—I—spit in his face—"

But before she could put her words into practice Antoine Dubosc was in the room and with gentle force had taken her by the shoulders and urged her to the door.

"There, my little cabbage, enough, that will do. You make affairs no better by this kind of thing, though I understand how you feel. There, go now and wait with patience until my return." He pushed her protesting through the door, closed it, and came back to Bessington.

"I apologize, M'sieur le Boss," he said with a shrug. "My Leonie she is excitable, she has given me what you call hell but this moment ago, but it is that she does not understand, honour is not to her what it is to me. But she means no harm and one always makes allowances for the ladies, that is understood."

"Naturally," replied Bessington. "I take it that we can start then?"

"At your convenience, monsieur. My servant has taken my friend's suit-case to the boat, so let us march if you please. Though it has formerly been my amiable task to help my friend in his walks, I now relinquish that pleasure to you monsieur. You will be careful with him down the steps."

But Bessington waved a hand.

"No," he said. "I prefer that you conduct him yourself. I will follow behind." Indeed, to have contemplated a walk down the cliff path with the Frenchman behind him was, in Richard Bessington's

opinion, to ask for trouble. Not until he had him safely covered with his automatic would Richard Bessington feel really safe.

And as the three set off, he dropped a pace behind them, and, taking the weapon from his pocket, held it ready in his hand.

CHAPTER XXIII

TWO SHOTS

THERE were but two sailors on the fast-going motor-boat, the engineer and steersman, and neither paid much heed to the arrival of the three passengers. They knew Antoine Dubosc too well to ask questions of him. He was their master, in that his superior cunning and ability had been the means of obtaining for them the luxuries and affluence of their present positions. For when not on the boat they lived at the chateau, enjoying what the others enjoyed.

They had their orders now, and directly they were on board the moorings were cast off and the throb of the powerful engines were heard.

"It will be cold on deck," said Dubosc. "I advise not the deck cabin but the one below, Monsieur le Colonel."

"In any case my charge would be placed in a cabin," was the uncompromising reply. "I run no risks, you understand."

"For yourself no, but for us! *Mon Dieu!* what of that *automatique* which you held during our walk down the cliff? *Ma foi,* monsieur, you ran a great risk there, but it was of stumbling and shooting one of us in the back." And here the Frenchman laughed, as though at a good joke. "It was perhaps to your

mind better than that one of us should shoot *you* in the back, eh?"

"There was no fear of an accident from me," replied Bessington, realizing uncomfortably that the Frenchman had read his thoughts. "I am used to weapons."

"As myself, no doubt, though without the reputation of Monsieur le Colonel as the finest shot in Europe, *Helas!*" said Dubosc. *"Allons,* let us then deposit ourselves on the soft lounges in my cabin. The quarters are cramped, but as you will understand in a racing craft of this kind, space is small, and what space there is must be used for engines and storing contraband."

"For God's sake, don't talk about that," exclaimed Dominic, as his friend steered him down to the small saloon. "It was abominable of you to have used what I told you in such a manner, especially after telling me that you had given all that up."

"My friend, do not abuse me. It is true that I have given up theft long ago as you know. Smuggling is another thing. It is merely a duty that I owe to myself and my friends in your country, and duty is a very elastic term—as Monsieur le Colonel seems also to think."

"Perhaps the less we say about smuggling the better," observed the elder man, dryly. They were moving at a great rate now, and the small boat trembled under the powerful engines.

"I do not see that," retorted Dubosc, his lids narrowed. "Sit down, *mon brave.*" He pulled Dominic on to the couch beside him. "Here is a match, you have cigarettes, I know, and I do not think it is necessary to ask monsieur your escort's permission that

you smoke." This with a grin at Bessington, who murmured: "Of course not."

Dominic lit his cigarette and lay back against the padded seat, listening idly to the conversation.

"To return to our muttons," proceeded Dubosc, with another glance at Bessington. "Smuggling, as practised by me, is a fine art, it is also a charity. Think of all the pretty girls in England and Scotland who would, were it not for me, have to pay—through the nose, you call it?—for their stockings. But with my help they may buy three pairs where without it they would obtain but one. That alone is a matter for rejoicing."

"I think I suggested that the less you said about that the better," observed Bessington once more. He was anxious to force a quarrel, and this Frenchman was something of a puzzle to him, who had never gone in for the study of character in individuals, preferring to take those he came in contact with at their face value. The fellow was a crook, had owned to it, gloried in it in fact, and yet so far he had played straight, too straight for Madame Leonie's taste, too. And either this could only be in order to save his own skin or else because he had some ulterior motive behind his seemingly easy compliance. But had it been so, surely he would have exhibited more reluctance in allowing his friend to be taken back to punishment, if only for the look of the thing, or was he, too, fairly confident that the British Government would not deal too harshly with a blind man who, whatever wrong he had done had at least tried to do his bit for his country and paid bitterly for it.

If that was the Frenchman's real reason for this show of easy compliance, it was, and had been also Bessington's only fear when he discovered Arden to be blind. From that moment there was only one thing to do, and in order to accomplish that Dubosc had first of all to be got rid of, and there again was only one alternative, and surely not a difficult one of achievement seeing that the fellow who must be dealt with was a Frenchman and would see nothing odd in the otherwise ridiculous matter of a duel. And in a duel with revolvers or automatics, Richard Bessington was bound to be the victor. He would therefore force a quarrel on this man, the issue of which would be practically a certainty. A duel in the eyes of most Frenchmen was the proper and only way to settle a dispute. The two men on board would see nothing wrong or out of the way in this, and for their own sakes they would forbear to suspect anything wrong. This was, of course, the one way out of an otherwise very difficult situation—if Dubosc chose to risk the conseqences and make it so.

And he sat there, eyeing the engaging young criminal, who was so shortly to be food for fishes, and utterly ignorant of the fact that much the same kind of thought was passing through the mind of his potential victim. The thought, in fact, that was the sole reason for his presence on board and for his seemingly easy compliance with the other's demands.

And when two men, however different their motives may be, are determined on the same course of action, it is safe to believe that they will not find much difficulty in achieving it.

And while they both made their plans, the innocent object of all their thoughts and aims sat beside them, oblivious of anything save the fact of his own helpless position, and the nearing of his own end, while all the time the fast motor-boat was surging out to sea and the shores of France were already only a memory.

It occurred, therefore, to both of them that, if the good work was to be accomplished, it must be done while there was sufficient light in which to see to shoot by, and it was already beginning to fail. Antoine Dubosc accordingly seized the opportunity which—unknown to him—had been held out. He, in fact, snapped at it as a dog that is offered an appetizing morsel.

"You suggest, I understand, monsieur," he said, in his most polite manner, "that the less I say about smuggling the better? Perhaps, though, I misunderstood and it was not what you said?"

"On the contrary, you understood me perfectly," was the reply.

"Ah. Then permit me to observe, monsieur, that I dispute your right to dictate to me as to what I shall or shall not converse upon. I am not—I thank the good God—also your prisoner, remember."

"Come, come, Monsieur Dubosc. Kindly remember to whom you are speaking. I am not here of my own wish but because of my duty—"

"Ah bah! Enough of duty, monsieur," said Dubosc, rising suddenly. "I have heard all I want of that subject, it is time that I made my own few remarks on this matter and, since this saloon becomes

overheated, it would be more comfortable for my friend to be alone, and I suggest that we therefore go on deck."

There was no suspicion in Bessington's mind that the other was also trying to force a quarrel. He had calculated that it would not be difficult of accomplishment with this hot-blooded French crook but it was easier even than he had thought. It was also uncomfortably close there, and he felt that he would be better able to cope with the situation if he had not to sit opposite that forlorn-looking figure on the other seat. He rose instantly.

"I agree with you," he said. "You will, I suppose, allow me to lock this door?" he added, as they stood in the narrow opening to the companionway. Dubosc shrugged.

"*Mais, comme vous voulez, monsieur.* I do not think he is likely to try and commit suicide, and, saving that, he is safe enough. But by all means turn the key on him; it is, no doubt, as well that he becomes used to the sound at once."

A moment later the two were on deck, the key of the saloon in Bessington's pocket.

The stout boat was speeding ahead, leaving two white foaming trails in her wake. The sea was as smooth as any bad sailor could have wished, and, save for the whirr of the high-powered engines, and the intermittent sound of the man at the wheel, there was nothing to disturb the two would-be combatants.

"Now, Monsieur Dubosc," Bessington turned and faced the Frenchman. "You had some remarks to make on the subject of duty. I shall be interested to hear them.

There was no suspicion either, in Dubosc's mind, that his companion was forcing the issue. He merely considered that he was an easy man to quarrel with, and, incidentally, the most credulous fool he had ever had the fortune to come in contact with. It did not trouble him in the least that he was considered the best revolver shot in Europe. Monsieur Antoine Dubosc had no occasion to feel any particular alarm over that.

"My remarks, Monsieur le Colonel, I'm afraid will not be very palatable to you, for they concern your motive in getting hold of your friend and taking him back to what you call justice."

"My motives are clean, I have nothing to worry about there."

"Indeed? Well, that is—in fact—what I doubt. Listen, Monsieur le Colonel. I, who have lived my life to the full, and have no shame in it, *ma foi non!* I have had occasion to study men—and women, *bien entendu*—and I have found that though there are many incentives to the committing of crime—crime, you understand—yet there is one that is greater than all and which seldom fails. And this, monsieur, is the force of love and that which is connected with love—jealousy and lust."

"What do you mean by that exactly?" demanded Bessington.

"I mean, Monsieur le Colonel, that I do not believe in your cry of duty, when you speak of your reason in dealing with my poor friend, nor yet in the honesty of that dealing when you offer him the choice of a return to his wife. For you knew he would refuse

and so it was no choice at all. You wish to hang him. Why? Not for love of the friend he killed, time has itself killed all that long ago. And for your duty—that is nothing unless it goes with your inclination. Then there is some other reason and I, being a Frenchman, for which I most devoutly thank God—" and here he raised his soft felt hat—"and therefore quick of wit and understanding in the matters of the heart, I point my finger on the real motive, and I say, *naturellement, cherchez la femme.*"

"What the devil do you mean?" demanded Bessington, real anger now in his tone at last. The other laughed unpleasantly.

"I mean, monsieur, that if there is a woman, it is not difficult to imagine the name of that woman. I have seen the photograph of my friend's wife which he wears—God help him—next his heart. For when he was ill, it was I, my faith! who saw to him. And it is easy to suppose—I also being a man, monsieur, that you—being what God made you—are as eager to possess her as any other man might be. Oh yes, my Colonel, you may fool others into believing that it was your duty to your country or your friendship for the murdered man which made you come here to take my friend back to his death, but, believe me, I, Antoine Dubosc, who have made a study of the motives of frail humanity, am not so easily deceived. I say to myself, you want this woman! *Bien.* The rest is easy to understand."

Bessington's eyes suddenly glittered.

"And that, Monsieur Dubosc," he said quietly, "is a lie."

Instantly the Frenchman turned on him.

"*'Cre nom!*" he cried. "You say that to me! To my face? That I lie? I—Antoine Dubosc!"

"Yes. I repeat that you lie, Monsieur Dubosc."

"*Bien.* It is enough. Monsieur le Colonel will, no doubt, give me the satisfaction that I demand for so gross an insult. Nothing else would avail, and I take it that he is no coward. Or perhaps, for example, I am mistaken in that."

"You have made no mistake," was the cold reply, "and I am ready to meet you, Monsieur Dubosc, and I think there could be no better place than on this deck, and no more fitting time than the present." Dubosc bowed.

"There, we are in agreement," he said dryly. "We have an hour of daylight yet, perhaps you will have no objection to any arrangements I may make which will be of benefit to us?"

"I have no objection so long as they are open and aboveboard," was the reply.

"Again an insult, Monsieur le Colonel. *Ma foi!* but it is time we settled this matter between us, I think."

He turned abruptly, gave the signal to the engineer to shut off power and to come on deck at once.

"We will, at least, have two witnesses to these proceedings," he said. "And for weapons, I being the one who is insulted, have the choice. But since there are no rapiers on board—a matter for regret—we must perforce use our revolvers. I suggest only that we both examine each other's weapon—if, monsieur, you are agreeable to this?"

"Certainly. I for one should desire it." The words and suggestion in themselves were sufficiently insulting, without the added note of distrust that less sensitive ears than Dubosc's would have heard without difficulty.

He glanced for a moment at his antagonist out of narrowed eyelids, and then turned sharply as the engineer came striding along the deck.

In a few words, and with Bessington listening keenly, he explained the position, while the other, a short wiry man, with a hawk-like face and shifty eyes, listened in complete silence. At the end, he nodded.

"Bien," he said at last. "Both gentlemen may rely on me and Jean there to keep a silence on the matter, for our own sakes also. You would wish for us to be witnesses to this, *mon capitaine?"*

"Certainly. And as this gentleman is without a friend of his own on deck and as he knows—or thinks he knows—with what kind of men he has to deal, I should wish him to search you both that he may feel confident he has only one automatic against him. You are agreeable to this, Monsieur le Colonel?"

"It is certainly fair," he conceded. "Though it may not be necessary."

"And you two, you agree?" By this the other man had come up and his friend explained matters in a few words. They both laughed good-humouredly.

"Ma foi, yes!" said Marcel. "The English monsieur is very welcome to search us both. It is, after all, but natural."

The search was thereupon made and Bessington turned to his adversary.

"I am satisfied," he said. "It will be one shot only, I suppose, Monsieur Dubosc?"

"If that is your desire, yes."

"It is," was the reply. "I also suggest that instead of the usual twelve paces, we stand—you at one end, I at the other. It will, I imagine, be more difficult to commit murder—if either of us is so minded—at that distance."

"Perfectly," replied Dubosc, without a sign of fear or doubt in his tone. And yet, knowing the other's reputation as a crack shot, he was fully aware of the fact that Colonel Bessington did indeed contemplate murder, for at such a distance between them, none but an expert could hope to achieve success. "And, monsieur, supposing that we both miss, which at such a distance is not difficult of accomplishment, what then?"

"Then I propose one more shot apiece. There is no other course."

"I am content," replied the Frenchman, with a bow, and once more he turned to his men. "You, Marcel, will stand in the centre of the boat and give the signal. Jean, you shall keep a watch, for of course we are in the direct line of passing vessels, and this kind of thing—" he shrugged, "well, you know as well as I that unpleasant things might happen if it were seen."

"I understand, *mon capitaine.*"

"You, Marcel, will hold this stick in your hand, and will count six, and at the sixth count you will drop this stick sharply on deck. On which we, who have our backs turned to each other, will turn and fire. Is that not so, Monsieur le Colonel?"

"Agreed," was the reply.

"If I fall, *mon ami,*" continued Dubosc, "you will understand that it is in fair fight, and you will continue on your journey with this gentleman as though nothing had occurred."

"Yes, *mon capitaine.*"

"If, on the other hand, I am so lucky as to kill this gentleman, I will give you my orders as to what you must do. If—for we must consider every possibility—we are both wounded, you will return to my chateau as quickly as possible. But if this gentleman is as good a shot as I hear he is, then one of us or even both may die, in which case I should recommend that you have a quick burial service at sea and return home, advise Madame to sell all immediately, and then to disappear, in case questions should be asked and suspicions aroused. You understand?"

"I understand, *mon capitaine.*"

"Good. Then, monsieur, here is my weapon, do me the honour of examining it and allow me to do the same with yours."

As he spoke, Dubosc handed his automatic to Bessington. The Englishman did the same. Each examined the other's weapon carefully and minutely and at once returned them, Dubosc with a low bow.

"We are ready, Marcel," he said, and walked to the stern of the boat while Bessington retired to the bows.

Absolute stillness on board save for the gentle lap of waves against the scarcely-moving craft. Jean, looking out across the sea, was also silent, for even the ceaseless song had died on his lips. While Marcel, the engineer, stick in hand, stood amidships on the

port side, the two duellists at either end, both with their backs facing each other.

And down below, locked fast in the saloon, Dominic Arden, ignorant of what was taking place on deck, sat on the couch leaning forward, his face buried in his hands and in his sightless eyes the vision of a woman's face, the one thing only in all the world that he could visualize clearly, and picture so vividly that it was to him as if he were actually looking into her face.

And so he sat immovable, until suddenly, and without warning, the throbbing of the engines ceased, he heard voices overhead, the sound of footsteps, a silence, and then the gruff tones of Marcel's voice counting slowly. What did it mean? Why had they stopped?

And then two shots rang out in quick succession—the sound of a heavy fall, and he sprang to his feet and listened breathlessly. Once more there came the sound of hurrying steps above—shouts—but he could not distinguish what was said. What had happened? Had they been pursued by a Government Customs boat? Or—and here a sudden wild hope leapt within him—had those two, who had seemed before they left him, none to friendly, been quarrelling? Had Antoine, that queer, fiery, and yet altogether lovable creature, forced a duel on the other? Was that his reason for bidding him have courage before they started on this hateful journey? He had said, "Trust me, all will be well." Was that prophecy to be made good at the end of an automatic? Not murder? No, that was unthinkable, and, besides, there had been two shots. It was a duel, therefore, and Bes-

sington—good God! Bessington was the finest revolver shot in Europe, and not knowing of his intent he had not warned Antoine of this in time. And yet he had heard his friend refer to it, so perhaps he knew, but if he really knew how good a shot the other was, would he have risked a duel? No sane man would unless he was wishful to commit suicide and lacked the courage to draw the trigger himself. And Antoine had no wish to die.

What then was the meaning of those two shots and that heavy fall? Who lay dead up there on deck? Antoine or Bessington? Was it difficult to guess, after all? And if Antoine—

"My God!" groaned the wretched man, and flung himself on to the seat once more, waiting in helpless agony for what should come. Would the waiting never end?

Footsteps at last. Whose? Antoine's or Bessington's? Oh, for one little moment of sight to enable him to see when the door opened, who should come in. His bitter enemy, or his only friend?

And presently someone was fumbling with the lock. The key turned at last—the door was flung open, and the next instant he felt himself folded in a warm embrace, and a kiss—a man's kiss—upon his cheek. It was only a Frenchman who would do that, and only one Frenchman who would do it to him.

So that it needed no words, nor yet the sound of his voice to tell him that Antoine Dubosc stood there, holding both his hands as though he would never let them go.

"Ah, mon brave! Mon ami! Mon bien cher ami,

all is well, all is over, and you are free once more. He —that sacred pig of an Englishman—is no more, and it is I, Antoine, who has shot him. We had words—he insult me. I allow no man to insult me, and I challenge him therefore. We fight and—he lies there on deck, and in a short time we return home. *V'la!* What have you to say to that, old son?"

Dominic staggered to his feet.

"He is dead, you say?" he repeated in a dazed voice.

"Quite. Most completely dead, my friend, and it is I—Antoine Dubosc—who killed him."

"But, good God! Antoine, old man, he was counted the finest revolver shot in Europe."

"*Bien,* I believe you. Then I, your friend, must be the finest in the world!" He laughed. "But, to be serious, it was no doubt the reason why he suggest for the far distance between us, in order to kill me, you understand, in fact, to murder! Ah, but it did not come off this time, for as it happen he missed, and I—I who very often miss, I did not do so now. No doubt it is the good God who direct the bullet. That is all. I go up now to bury him."

"Bury him?" repeated Dominic, hoarsely.

"*Mais, pour sur.* We do not want to carry a dead man back with us I think. We bury him decently here, and who is the wiser? Until the sea give up her dead, Monsieur le Colonel Bessington will not be seen again, and neither—I believe most truly—will he be missed. If a search is made, it will be made, but one cannot be accused of killing a man if that man's dead body is not found. *Enfin,* when all is said and done he is best dead, so now—to business.

Stay you quiet *mon ami,* we shall soon be home, and perhaps, though you are not a Catholic—more the pity—it would not hurt you to say a prayer for his soul. For, truly, *mon gars,* he was a brave man—if for nothing else than to have ventured alone on this boat. But, of course, it is as you please. I go now."

And on the deck above, while a body wrapped in canvas and weighted at the feet was being gently lowered into the sea by two sailors, Antoine Dubosc, leaning over the rail, was also preparing an act of interment. First, he took fom his pocket his own weapon, for which now he would have no further use, and which might tell a tale that he would prefer kept a secret for ever, and dropped it in the sea. And from the other pocket he took the weapon that had once belonged to Richard Bessington, and that also found its watery grave.

It was better so, he considered, with a shrug, for things have an odd way of coming to light, and he did not want anyone, far less Dominic Arden, to know that from the first weapon there were two shots missing, and that the second was fully loaded.

Only Marcel and Jean (who had politely offered to commit the crime themselves) could know that two shots had been fired before ever the stick was dropped, and that one of those shots had entered Colonel Bessington's heart through the back.

Murder, if you will—once more he shrugged—but the man Bessington had contemplated murder, and his own—Dubosc's—first shot had missed. Also was it not the dead man's own favourite maxim that to do evil that good might result was, after all, mere-

ly common sense? *Enfin,* he was dead and could therefore create no more trouble. And so, after all, what did it matter? So long as his poor friend did not know the truth, all was well.

"That is," he added aloud and with another eloquent shrug, "unless the body of M'sieur le Boss should take upon itself to become disengaged from its sacking and lead weight and float inconveniently to land. A possibility which you should do well to contemplate, Antoine, my friend, and make preparations for—otherwise—" Here he passed his lean fingers suggestively round his neck—and started as a hand was laid on his arm.

"Ah! Devil take you, Marcel! I did not hear you," he cried, as he swung round to find the man standing beside him. "What is it?"

"I heard you speaking, Master. I thought it was to me," was the reply.

"Ah no. It was but to myself. I was considering that this, after all, may not be the end of the story, and that there may be another, and one of much excitement and interest for us and our friends, to follow."

The man, not understanding, smiled and shook his head. "In an hour we shall be home, Master," he said, and Dubosc grinned.

"Exactly, my friend. In an hour we shall be home once more. That, for the moment, is all that matters."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE END OF A JOURNEY

THEY were three very weary travellers who alighted from the automobile which had driven them the seven miles from the largest and nearest town to the Chateau St. Michel. It was quite dark when at length these three, Hermione, Iza, and Frank Daneham, stood outside the front door and the latter rang the bell. For the driver had not known his way to this more or less lonely part of the coast, and the three travellers were unable to help him.

Were they in time or were they not? That was the question which had rung ceaselessly in Hermione's thoughts during the latter part of the journey. And if they were, what was going to happen? What would be the result?

Frank Daneham had put his foot down against a journey by air, for neither of the two women had ever tried that experience, and, in Hermione's nervous state, he wisely thought that it would be better —for her—to arrive late than in a state of collapse through air sickness, as was more than likely to happen in her case. Moreover, he did not think they would be too late, for even if the boat arrived that evening, it was a hundred chances to one that they would not set out on a return journey until the following morning.

Anyway, they were here, and apparently likely to be kept waiting on the doorstep indefinitely, for he had rung twice and still there was no answer to their summons.

"I expect that young smuggler man is afraid we are the police," was Iza's comment. "Why the deuce don't he have a peep from one of those windows? No one in their senses would take *me* for a policeman, surely."

"It would certainly be difficult," replied Frank, smiling.

And then the door was opened, a light overhead flashed on, and a manservant stood in the opening.

"Monsieur desire?" he began, casting a quick glance over the three.

"I believe Monsieur Dubosc lives here," said Frank Daneham. "If I am right, would you take these three cards and ask him if he will see us on a matter of great importance?"

As he spoke, he held out his own, Hermione's and Iza's cards, and on that of Hermione the name Rodenberg had been crossed out and that of Arden substituted.

The man looked at them and hesitated.

"You are from England?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, my good man," struck in Iza, who spoke French fluently. "We are from England and come over specially to see Monsieur Dubosc on a very grave and urgent matter. Will you also mention the fact that it is a private matter—between friends, you understand."

A look of intense relief came to the man's face at the last words. "I will tell Madame, the master is out," he replied, and once more closed the door.

"One cannot blame such caution, in the circumstances," commented Iza Marsh. "Buck up, my dear child. If your boy had gone there wouldn't be all this fuss and precaution."

"That's my opinion, too," agreed Frank. But Hermione only smiled at them, anxiety had long ago rendered her beyond speech.

Five minutes passed, an interminable five minutes, and then the door swung violently open, but this time it was not the servant who stood there, but a dark-haired, white-faced and very excited woman. She gave one look at Hermione's face.

"Ah! *Mon Dieu!*" she cried, for it was the face she had seen so many times on an old faded photograph. "It is she at last! *Entre, mesdames, enter, monsieur,* I ask your pardon for the delay, but, no doubt you will understand that it is sometimes a necessity, and Monsieur Dubosc, he is not here at the moment."

As she spoke she drew aside for the others to enter, and directly they had done so she slammed to the door.

Frank Daneham turned to her instantly.

"Madame Dubosc," he said, sharply. "Tell me quickly, is there a man called Bessington here, Colonel Bessington? I know he was coming here, so we hurried off to try and intercept him."

"Ah, *mais non,*" she cried. "The Colonel he has been here, but he is here no longer. He has departed these two hours or more."

And at that there was a cry from Hermione, who put her hand to her face and swayed suddenly.

"No, no!" she cried brokenly. "Not that! Don't tell me he has gone!"

The Frenchwoman, quick of understanding, put an arm about her.

"Imbecile that I am!" she cried, a great compassion in her voice. "He has gone, but he has gone alone, Madame Arden. He has gone—so my—my husband tells me, to the South of France for a long stay, and because he has no wish to return to his country just now. There is nothing to fear. Your husband he is with us, quite—quite safe."

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!" cried Hermione, and she took Leonie's hand in hers and held it. "Tell me about it, Madame Dubosc. You guessed we were coming? You knew about everything?"

"All there is to know, madame," was the reply. "And I did indeed think that perhaps you might come, or that other who was with the Colonel when they caught my—husband. For he told me that he was much distressed, that one, at what his friend was doing. But the good God knows that I am glad it is you, madame, who have come—at last."

"It's not her fault, Madame Dubosc," put in Iza, quickly, "that she was not here eight years ago. But to me, the whole thing is a complete mystery, and if *you* know all about it, then all I can say is that we are not so lucky. There's a good deal we want to know and have come here to find out."

"All in good time, madame," replied Leonie, with a friendly smile. "I understand how you feel, and

probably what you think, which is, no doubt, very far from the truth. But now that you are here we can explain everything."

"Ah, but you don't understand," cried Hermione, eagerly. "You don't know everything either. I only heard that he was alive and where he lived two days ago. Until then I had believed him dead. And then when I heard the truth and knew that Colonel Bessington had come for him, I was nearly mad with fear. Are you sure, quite sure that he has gone? That my husband is safe?"

"Not only that he has gone, but that he has gone for good," replied Leonie. "After what he found here he said there was nothing more for him to do, but that he would not return to his country. Perhaps you, madame, may guess why. So, there is nothing to fear and nothing to reproach yourself with. For if you did not know, then you could not have come."

"But since Dominic Arden is alive," here interrupted Frank Daneham, "and apparently living in luxury and contentment with good friends, surely it is strange that he did not even write to his wife who was mourning him for dead. Surely it is strange that he did not make any attempt to find her."

"Surely it seems so," replied the Frenchwoman, with a queer smile on her face, "very strange, and will remain strange until you understand why. Remember that Colonel Bessington came here to take him back to punishment and what he called justice. And when he had seen him—he goes away alone. Perhaps that is also what Madame his wife will do

when she sees him, and if she does, *ma foi!* he will not reproach her."

"What do you mean?" There was a note of sudden terror in Hermione's voice, and she clutched Leonie's arm. "What has happened? Tell me at once. Remember that I am his wife, and that I love him, just as I loved him when he left me nine years ago. You are terrifying me, madame. Tell me, I implore you."

"Pauvre enfant." The elder woman took the clutching hand and patted it gently. "I did not understand. But you will have to know, and it is best for you to know from me. That poor boy, who still worships you in his heart, and to whom life without you is one long torment, remains here with us, apart from you, not only because he fears to return to his own country, and so involve you in his troubles, but because he will not spoil your life by being tied to a blind husband. That is why, madame."

"Blind!" Hermione repeated the word as though some invisible hand were strangling her throat. "My boy blind! Dominic blind! Oh, my God!" She put her hands to her head and swayed suddenly, and the next instant Frank Daneham had an arm about her and had lowered her into a chair.

"La pauvre petite!" said Leonie, compassionately. "It is a very terrible thing, I know, but surely, madame, it is better than that he is dead."

"Oh no. Not for him! I am only thinking of him—not my self," cried Hermione, bitterly. "He loved life so. He loved everything that he saw, sound was nothing to him. Sight everything. Tell me, madame, how is it that he is blind?"

"For seven years he has been so. One day, perhaps, he will tell you, but he has forbidden us to speak of it, and so I cannot do so, it is understood."

"But I don't understand, madame," exclaimed Daneham. "He was reported dead, his body was found. How was it that the mistake happened?"

"Ah, that was simple, and so easy to happen in a war of such horrors. When he went out of the cottage after killing that man—for which I do not blame him, I—he meant to die, to be killed. But, as often happens when one wants to die on the battlefield, one remains alive, or one is merely wounded. It is those who do not wish to die who are killed. So it was with him. He was wounded, and he knew that meant that he would be shot when he recovered. He was alone at the time, lost I think, and he tumbled over a dead body. The man was of his own build, but the head—Ah, *mon Dieu!* There was no head, monsieur. He, Dominic, was dazed, sick, but he kept his senses, and it was then that the idea arrived. That if he could not die, he might change places with one who had more fortunately achieved death. He changed into the dead man's uniform and everything that could identify him. After which he had little strength left, but enough to crawl away—as he thought—to his own lines. But what he did was to crawl instead into a German prison camp, and the rest you know. From the first I took to him as to a brother. *Enfin,* my friends, he recovered his health, and he is now a writer of some distinction. That is his one happiness. He dictates his stories and I write them down—a ray of light in his darkness. He is becoming famous, but he hides his fame under

another name. But he will tell you all that when you see him. And then it will be for you, madame, to write for him—and for me—ah! *mon Dieu!* To regret that I can no longer make my poor hands ache for him. That I can no longer be his eyes—" There were great tears in her own now, and the next instant Hermione had folded her in her arms.

Fank Daneham and Iza turned and walked abruptly to the window where the plump woman stood dabbing her eyes and seeing nothing. But outside on the lighted terrace, Frank saw two figures, both those of young men, though the hair of one of them was grey at the temples. They were talking together, one seeming to be arguing, the other protesting; finally, the one who argued appeared to gain his point, for he took the arm of the grey-haired man and turning, drew him towards the door. And once more, after nine long years, Frank Daneham looked upon the face of Dominic Arden, and a burning lump welled up into his throat as he saw the unmistakeable signs of suffering on his worn face.

They came slowly along the terrace, and presently their steps sounded in the outer hall. Then Leonie put Hermione gently from her, and walking briskly up to Daneham and Iza, took them each by an arm.

"This way, if you please, madame and monsieur," she said, leading them towards a door. "There is much that I would tell you and show you, though I trust that you will make a long stay with us. Come."

And that is why there were none to hear the man's cry as he stood alone in the great hall, and none to see the look of pity, love, and joy that came to the woman's eyes as she saw him.

"Hermione!" The cry was that of a child calling to the one being in all the world whom he knows will help him, the cry of a lost soul to its mate. And the next instant the two were locked in each other's arms.

. . . . .

"It has," said Antoine Dubosc, as he walked slowly beside Frank Daneham, "been a task of the most arduous since the moment we knew his wife was here, to persuade him to go back with her to his home. These unselfish people, you know, *mon cher,* are very selfish after all. But finally I persuaded him, I—Antoine Dubosc—for I have a way of persuasion which is not to be resisted."

"Not, I trust, in the same manner that you persuaded me to keep quiet on that most memorable night, Monsieur Dubosc?" said Daneham, with a smile.

The young man flung up his head and burst into a gay laugh.

"Ah, to be sure, no, monsieur, I did not drug him with dope, but with the genius of my tongue, my words of infinite wisdom. And neither will it be necessary to drug anyone else for the same reason, for I, monsieur, have done with contraband. The final cargo of contraband that I shall do myself the honour to take to your country and dump there will be my poor friend and his most beautiful wife. And in future years, monsieur, my boat shall only be used for conveying Leonie and myself to my friend's home, which will be on occasions of the most frequent.

"But enough of that. I am glad you reminded me,

monsieur, of what I did to you, for recognizing you when I saw you again, I had not the face—you call it—to refer to the subject, or to apologize as I should have liked. But to show you that I am penitent, permit that I offer you the same brandy that you drank that night. And to show that you, in turn, bear no malice, be brave enough, monsieur, to do me the honour of drinking it."

"I'm hanged if I won't risk it," said Frank Daneham, with a hearty laugh.

But as they turned towards the dining-room, Frank Daneham put a question to his companion.

"You told me," he said, "that Colonel Bessington, when he saw the true state of affairs, remembered that he was an Englishman and a gentleman and took himself off. You also told me that he was not returning to England. Do you know where he has gone?"

"Helas, mon ami," was the reply, which was accompanied by an expressive shrug. "I am not in a position to tell you where exactly he has gone, though, perhaps, without much strain on my imagination, I might guess. *Enfin,* he has gone upon a long journey, having—so I understood—nothing for which to return to his own country. He has no relations I take it?"

"A brother, I believe, in India."

"Ah! A brother. Perhaps he goes to join him, perhaps not. But in any case he will, you understand, be no more trouble to us."

"But when he returns, what then? Crosby will make no trouble, of course, for I shall explain everything to him at once. But what of Bessington, when he returns?"

"Ah! When—or if—he returns!" Again the young man shrugged. "I, for one, monsieur, do not think he will, and the wish, you understand, is father to the thought." And here, once more, he drew his long fingers caressingly round his neck.

THE END

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